Either-Or Situation

(Matthew 25:31-46)

Christians know that Jesus will return from heaven to judge the living and the dead. Before that great day, *how should we live*? Jesus answers this question in four parables, each one building on the other. This sermon today is number four and the culmination of the previous three parables: The True Disciple, The Ten Bridesmaids, and Good and Faithful Servant.

Each of these parables end with an either/or situation.. What I mean is, we make a choice or a comparison. Life is full of choices, some of which must be made very quickly, and some which require deep thought or reflection. Others involve a choice that may affect the rest of our lives.

Let me start with a brief comment about all the three parables we have already heard. Jesus told us to be ready because we do not know when he will return (24:44). In the first of his four stories, he describes a master who goes away for a while and leaves one of

his employees in charge (24:45-51). If the employee has performed well, the boss will reward him. If not, he will be thrown out. So, the employee's either/or situation is "perform well or be thrown out."

The second parable describes ten bridesmaids waiting for the groom to arrive at the wedding (25:1-13). Like the faithful employee, five bridesmaids know he could be a while and are prepared. Five are not prepared and upon his arrival, find themselves shut out. So, the five unprepared bridesmaids either/or situation is be prepared or be shut out.

In the third parable, a master entrusts his property to three of his servants (v. 14-30). Again, the master is away for a long time, and as in the earlier parables, we see how the men spend their time. Two use the money the master gives them to make a profit for his kingdom, and are rewarded. Yet, just like there was one faithless employee (24:48) and five foolish

virgins (25:2), there is an unproductive servant who buries his

talent (vv. 24-25). He too is cast out. So, the unproductive employee's situation is, make a profit or be cast out.

We've been told to be ready and then to be productive in God's service, but what is the profit the master wants from his servants? The final parable, today's story, takes us to judgment day (vv. 31-46). Again, there are two groups of people. What is the difference? It is seen in how they lovingly treat the brothers of Jesus (v. 40). In Matthew's gospel these "brothers" are Jesus' disciples. The faithful disciple is the one who uses the resources the Lord has given him or her to help a brother or sister in need. Once again, the wicked that do nothing are cast out. So, the wicked disciple's situation is to be helpful or be cast out.

How then should we live? We should use our resources to bless others, especially God's people, by deeds of love and kindness. That is the profit Jesus

wants. These are the ones who are living in the light of Jesus' coming.

This year marks the 17th year that Danny's Meats sponsors Thanksgiving Racine. We became acquainted with this event years ago when we lived in Racine. Like many events like this—soup kitchens are completely staffed by volunteers, both long-term and short-term. Occasionally, volunteers show up to help because they had been ordered by a judge to do a certain number of hours of public service, Some work hard, but others do the bare minimum, just enough to get their requirement signed off. They were present in body, but not in spirit.

Some people see their faith that way—both in Jesus' time and now. They want the benefits of the faith but aren't interested in actually living it out. This passage from Matthew is not talking about nonbelievers. The "goats" address Jesus as Lord. Jesus is speaking about those who think that saying they follow Jesus is

enough. Some followers of Christ think as long as they believe in Jesus and get baptized, they're home free. Or they think it's enough to go to church on Sunday and read the Bible, without letting what they learn shape their lives on Monday through Saturday. They don't actually want to become Jesus' apprentices and dedicate their lives to him.

It is not that we must earn God's salvation. It's the other way around: Because we are saved by grace, our hearts are filled with gratitude and love for God, and that love flows out to our fellow human beings in caring hearts and deeds of kindness. As James says, "faith without deeds is dead" (2:26). A living

faith will automatically lead to good works. Or, as I learned when we first moved to Oklahoma: "We are not saved **by** good works, we are saved **for** good works."

We care for others not to gain God's favor or earn heavenly bonus points, but because God's Spirit directs our hearts. If we truly love God, we will love

others—and that love will be seen in our words and actions when we serve others as if we were serving the Lord.

Those on Jesus' right in this Parable of the Sheep and Goats weren't serving others out of obligation or to check off a box on their religious checklist. They didn't even recognize that they were serving Jesus by serving others. They had internalized God's love so well that it spilled over into their entire lives. They fed the hungry, practiced hospitality, and visited the sick and lonely because they loved them.

We are called to a life of service, to love God and love others. But, we choose our attitude. As we go about our daily lives, we can see those around us as obstacles or annoyances, making it harder for us to do what we want to do. Or, we can see them as reflections of Jesus, people whom Good loves. We can serve grudgingly out of obligation, or we can let

Jesus' love fill us so full it automatically spills out in service of love to others.

By his Spirit, we can reflect Jesus, who is with us. Now, wherever we go, God will be with us. Whatever happens, God will be with us. But Jesus will not just be with us here and now, he will also be with us on the day when we will need Him the most. Everyone will have to stand before God, the righteous judge one day (Hebrews 9:27). We need someone who will be with us and say to our heavenly Father, "I have paid the price for their sins.

I stand with them." In other words, Jesus will offer "his record" of sinlessness to God on "our behalf."

At the Judgment Seat of Christ (2 Cor 5:10), Jesus says, "I will say to my Father that they belong to me" (Matt 10:32). In the judgment, a man will be held accountable for every blessing he refused to enjoy. Or as an Old Jewish Proverb said it, "Why didn't you enjoy the blessings God sent your way?" Or, "Did you take

advantage of the opportunities God is giving you in your life or did we squander them, like the Prodigal Son?"

You and I, though we are saved, will still have to answer these questions and others like them? Why? Because our rewards or profits will depend on our answers as shown in our deeds of love and service. And it's a good thing that our Judge is also our Savior!

So, what are the **lessons** we can learn from this Scripture reading from Matthew?

This passage emphasizes the criteria for divine judgment based on how individuals treat others, particularly the marginalized and needy. This passage illustrates that the final judgment will be based on acts of love, kindness, and compassion. Those who help the hungry, thirsty, and imprisoned are likened to sheep, while those who neglect these needs are likened to goats. The idea that serving others, especially the least among us, is equivalent

to serving Christ himself. This perspective encourages believers to recognize the dignity of every individual. This text highlights a Christian's responsibility to care for those who are suffering, regardless of their faith. And this passage concludes with the stark reality of eternal consequences for one's actions, reinforcing the seriousness of how and who we treat with love, kindness, and compassion.

Please bow your heads as I pray.

O God, Father of the poor, your Son, Jesus Christ was born among us poor, humble, and dependent. Open our eyes and our hearts and our hands to honor him now as our Lord and King by welcoming him in those who are hungry and thirsty. In all who are abandoned and lonely, in refugees, in the poor, and the sick, let your love become free and spontaneous, like the tenderness you have shown us in your Son. Welcome us in the everlasting Kingdom prepared for us through Christ Jesus, our Lord. We ask this in the name of your Son and our Savior, Jesus Christ. **Amen.**