

Lesson 18

Proper 29

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 25:31–46

When Jesus referred to Himself in relation to His saving work, He usually avoided the title *Messiah*, which means “the anointed one.” *Christ* is the same word but from the Greek language. Among the Jews it had been associated mainly with the promise of a kingly messiah who would establish David’s throne forever. It had taken on definitely political overtones as they longed for someone to free them from Roman domination.

Jesus usually referred to Himself as “the Son of Man.” Also “Son of Man” was a messianic title drawn from Daniel’s prophetic vision, but it was not as commonly used—and surely was not suggestive of a glorious earthly kingdom of Israel, as “messiah” could be construed to mean. In Jesus’ parable of the sheep and the goats, a picture of the final judgment, the full thrust of the apocalyptic meaning of “Son of Man” comes through. His story is about the coming of the Son of Man, accompanied by all His angels, to sit on His throne in heavenly glory.

271. What is the obvious purpose for which all nations will be gathered before the glorious Son of Man on His throne? On what basis will He separate the sheep from the goats? (See John 3:16–18, 36.)

It is important to note that the King’s “Come, you who are blessed by My Father” to those on His right and His “Depart from Me, you cursed” to those on His left, as well as His words about their serving Him or not serving Him, all are spoken after the separation has already taken place. Martin Franzmann says in *Follow Me*: “Before a word is spoken or any deed of man is told, the Shepherd separates the nations and places them at his right hand and his left. He is the Judgment in person; the Christ Himself divides” (p. 183). (See Luke 12:49–53; Matthew 10:34–39.)

272. Since the separation and its eternal consequences had already been determined, why does the King make such a point of “as you did/did not do it to one of the least of these My brothers”?

273. Whom does He mean by “the least of these My brothers”? What is the point of His saying, “As you did/did not do it to one of the least of these, My brothers, you did/did not do it to Me”?

Franzmann adds in *Follow Me*:

Whether a man has been for Him or against Him has shown itself, not in men's pious sentiments but in their deeds. And the King, the righteous Judge, unrolls the history of men before all eyes to show how the verdict which His action has pronounced has long since been written by the deeds of men. All deeds of mercy done to the least of these whom He in mercy calls His brethren have been a Yea to Him. . . . All deeds of mercy left undone have been a Nay to Him. (p. 183)

274. What does this parable encourage in us, who rejoice that “one is justified by faith apart from works of the law”? (Romans 3:28; see also Galatians 5:6; James 2:14–26.)

275. What are some practical ways in which you can serve Jesus in serving the needy?

276. What if you were to take the approach “I’m saved by grace through faith; why should I bother to do works of service?”

The Old Testament Lesson: Ezekiel 34:11–16, 20–24

Ezekiel, whose name means “God strengthens,” was God’s prophet during the dark days of Judah’s exile in Babylon. Jerusalem and the temple had been destroyed. Ezekiel warned of prolonged judgment. The Jews were not to expect early release from exile, but were to work at being at peace with themselves and with the Lord in their circumstances in exile. However, Ezekiel also gave hope by speaking of the restoration God would bring His people.

Chapter 34 begins with the Lord taking the shepherds, the religious leaders, to task for being derelict and self-serving in the performance of their duties—to the detriment of the flock. They were told that they would be removed from their privileged positions. (See Ezekiel 34:1–10.) Then, in this lesson, the Lord promised that He would enter the situation and Himself become the faithful, caring Shepherd His people needed.

277. What are the two thrusts that would be embodied in the concern the sovereign Lord would display upon becoming the Shepherd of the sheep? (See Luke 15:3–7; Psalm 23.)

278. What does this say to us about the responsibilities of all who want to serve faithfully as this Shepherd’s under-shepherds?

279. When would the promised restoration of the Shepherd's flock take place?

We fully appreciate a loving Shepherd who searches for the lost and brings back the strays, who builds up the injured and strengthens the weak, but it surely is strange to hear the Shepherd say, "The fat and the strong I will destroy." It is not just shepherds but also the sheep who come under the judging scrutiny of the sovereign Lord as the Shepherd. See what He says to the sheep in verses 17–22.

280. Since David had been dead for more than three hundred years when Ezekiel prophesied, who is "My servant David" who would be the "one shepherd" of God's flock and "prince" among God's people?

281. How does this Old Testament Lesson tie in with today's Holy Gospel?

The Epistle for the Day: 1 Corinthians 15:20–28

Paul knew that the Greek Christians were not stumbling over the resurrection of Jesus Himself, the Word made flesh, so much as the idea that all of them, as ordinary Christians, would also be raised from the dead. So he had confronted their doubts with a straightforward argument: "If the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins" (vv. 16–17).

Paul insisted that the facts of the matter were clearly seen in the historical evidence to which he had pointed them. "In fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep." The New Testament is unequivocal in its testimony to the bodily resurrection of Jesus. In the Greek text, Jesus says, "A spirit does not have flesh [*sarx*] and bones [*ostea*] as you see that I have." These words unmistakably affirm His full humanity also in His resurrection body, as did also His invitation to His disciples to touch Him and His eating in their presence. (See Luke 24:36–42.)

Today's American Christians must contend with the ideas of New Age offshoots of Greek philosophy and Eastern religions, which speak of the immortality of the spirit, sometimes through many reincarnations. The final goal in their systems is to be released from the cycle of earthly existences and to be absorbed again into the universal spirit. The Christian hope that Paul and the other apostles propounded, however, is more than an immortality of the spirit. It is the resurrection of the body, the whole human being, to a continued personal identity in the new heavens and new earth.

282. Of what does Jesus' becoming "the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep" assure us?

283. To underscore the victory Christ has won for us, Paul contrasted it with the human predicament. He wrote that “by a man [Adam] came death” and “in Adam all die.” What is the theological term for this universal human condition of sinfulness and death?

284. Paul followed that with “by a man [Jesus Christ] has come also the resurrection of the dead.” Why was it essential in God’s plan of salvation for humanity that a man, His Son in human flesh, share our experience of death and rise again in victory?

285. The victory of Jesus over death took place at a point in human history, AD 30, and at a specific geographic place, outside the walls of Jerusalem. When and where will the victory be fully displayed and the last enemy, death, be destroyed for all people?

286. When Christ “delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power” and “the Son Himself will also be subjected to Him who put all things in subjection under Him,” will this be a demotion for the One who has been highly exalted and given the name that is above every name? What is Paul saying in this? (See Revelation 5:11–14; 11:15.)

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Eternal God, merciful Father, You have appointed Your Son as judge of the living and the dead. Enable us to wait for the day of His return with our eyes fixed on the kingdom prepared for Your own from the foundation of the world; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 25:31–46

271. The nations will appear before Christ as He sits on His throne of glory for eternal judgment. (See Hebrews 9:27–28.) The parable of the sheep and the goats is very vivid. Syrian sheep were white; Syrian goats were black. This is no fuzzy, questionable judgment; the distinctions are clear! The Good News of salvation by grace through faith in Christ will not be changed at the Last Day into a judgment on the basis of works. It is faith (relationship with Christ) or lack of faith (lack of relationship with Christ), not works or lack of works, that immediately determines the separation of the sheep and the goats. Relationship with Christ is the determining factor in life now and will be eternally. (See John 3:16–18.)

272. The King will make a point of “As you did/did not do” as evidence that will vindicate and validate God’s surprising solution to the problem of human sin: His gracious gift of salvation to those who respond to Him in faith! In effect, it says publicly and plainly, “See? It worked! Lives were changed and were brought into relationship with God by the Good News of Jesus Christ.”

273. “The least of these My brothers” refers to Christians, who are His brothers and sisters regardless of how lowly and needy they may be. This is the same Jesus who said, “Whoever gives one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward” (Matthew 10:42). In saying “as you did it to one of the least of these My brothers, you did it to Me,” Jesus was stating that just as He Himself is the focal point of our faith, He is also the focal point of our Christian lives. Jesus is saying that He meets us in the persons of the needy, especially needy fellow Christians, whom we help in His name. Just as He meets us to give Himself to our faith in Word and Sacrament, so He meets us to receive our love in the love we show others. In Basel, Switzerland, is St. Martin’s Church. A sculpture on the front wall depicts Martin of Tours, a Roman soldier with strong Christian convictions. One cold winter day, entering a city, Martin was stopped by a beggar. Having no money, Martin took off his coat, cut it in two, and gave half to the beggar. That night he had a dream of heaven. Jesus was wearing half of a Roman soldier’s coat. An angel asked Him, “Master, why are You wearing that battered old cloak?” And Jesus answered, “My servant Martin gave it to Me.”

274. Sometimes we who rightly value and emphasize “by grace alone through faith alone” are tempted to ignore Jesus’ call to active discipleship. This picture of the judgment shows how serious our Lord is in His desire for faith that is a living relationship with Him, faith that prompts us to look

for ways to meet Him in serving others. Can we “make up our minds” to love? Yes!—when it is agape love, for agape is conscious, intelligent, purposeful love.

275. Some practical ways to practice agape: ask God to help you reach out in your own life setting to individuals in their need, and don’t sidestep opportunities to serve Jesus when He brings individuals to you; support Christian social ministry agencies with money and effort; encourage responsible governmental social service programs. The help given in every case needs to be intelligently given—as assistance to help them get back into taking care of themselves as much as they can.

276. Why bother? Because our Lord bothered enough to give Himself for us and to send His Spirit to renew us and tie us to Him in faith. And here He makes it clear that He wants more than words from us. He wants obedience to the will of God in a life that imitates His. (See Matthew 7:21–27.)

The Old Testament Lesson: Ezekiel 34:11–16, 20–24

277. The two thrusts: the Lord as Shepherd will search for sheep that are lost, and when they are restored to His flock, He will faithfully care for them.

278. The Church and its leaders always have to keep the functions of both of these thrusts in mind. It is intrinsic to the Great Commission that we disciple the nations by reaching out with the Good News and by then nourishing them as we teach all that the Lord has commanded. This is a “both/and” responsibility: evangelism and pastoral care are both necessary if the flock is to grow and prosper.

279. The restoration promised through Ezekiel would come to pass in the history of Judah in Persia’s conquest of Babylon, when Cyrus the Great would allow a remnant of the Jews to return to Judea under Zerubbabel, a Davidic prince, to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple. However, the description of the Shepherd’s care and the blessings that would result surely points us, for its ultimate fulfillment, to the eternal messianic kingdom.

Shepherds value the fat and the strong in their flocks—in fact, it is their aim that all of their sheep fit that description. In this instance, however, these terms referred to Jews who had adapted to their situations in the exile so wholeheartedly that they had become prosperous, even at the expense of fellow Jews. Ezekiel’s words may be seen as implying that they were also guilty of spiritual pride in their self-centeredness.

280. Ezekiel’s reference to “David” as the one shepherd and prince is obviously messianic in its thrust. It really was pointing to the promised Son of David who was to fulfill the covenant of grace and blessing, our Lord Jesus Christ.

281. This lesson’s ties to the Holy Gospel may be seen in the picture of Shepherd and sheep in both and in the fact that both speak about the ethical behavior that is required of those who are sheep in the flock.

The Epistle for the Day: 1 Corinthians 15:20–28

The Christian hope is for continued personal identity in a new life—with new bodies that will be suited to life in the new heaven and new earth. (See Philippians 3:20–21.) The Bible does not give a lot of details regarding lifestyle in the eternal kingdom. But it does indicate that “you will be you, and I will be me” and that we will live in full awareness of our Lord’s loving presence. (See Revelation 21:1–4.)

282. That Christ is the “firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” gives us assurance that those who “sleep in Jesus” will be raised to new life just as He was. Since Christ was raised as God’s own

firstfruits and is “waved” before God and proclaimed to us through the Gospel, we know the whole field of grain will be harvested at its appropriate time. In fact, as Paul wrote about this in Ephesians, he reverted to the Old Testament’s way of speaking about future events in the past tense. The assurance in this is that because God has promised it, it is as good as done. (See Isaiah 53; Ephesians 2:4–7.)

283. We speak of “original sin,” the sinful condition that is ours because of our connection to the original sinner, the “federal head” of humanity, whose actions infected all humans to follow. Because of this, we all are predisposed to sin; there is none who does not sin. (See Ecclesiastes 7:20.) God allowed sin to spoil His creation because He desires willing, loving obedience. He created the man and the woman with free will, with the ability to say yes to Him but also the possibility of saying no to Him, because a yes is meaningful only when a no is possible. Sinful humanity no longer has the free-will capability to say no to sin and yes to God—except through God’s power in the Holy Spirit.

284. In His holiness and justice, God could not just dismiss sin, pretend it isn’t there, or coexist with it. His love compelled Him to act to restore what had been lost. In Christ, He provided a new “federal head” for humanity. As Representative Man, through His obedient life, His vicarious suffering, and His victorious resurrection, Jesus redeemed and rescued fallen humanity, winning redemption for all mankind. Through His Spirit, by faith in His redemption, we are brought to say a new yes to God and a no to sin. (See Ephesians 4:17–24.)

285. Death will be destroyed when Christ returns in glory, raises all who have lived to stand before Him in the judgment, and, His mission of salvation completed, turns over the Kingdom to God the Father. The present age will be concluded, and the new heaven and new earth will replace it. The “where” of this climactic event is best described as “everywhere.” His coming will be like the lightning that flashes in the east and shines into the west. No one anywhere will be unaware of His coming.

286. Christ’s delivering the Kingdom to God the Father and being subject to Him will not be a demotion, but will be the final act by which He completes the saving work He was sent to accomplish. It’s hard to think of One who was highly exalted because He had willingly humbled Himself to be obedient to His Father’s saving will (Philippians 2:5–11) then having to be subjected again. Paul is evidently saying that Christ, His work completed, will willingly return the authority that had been committed to Him (Matthew 28:18) back to His Father—and God will be all in all.