

Our Beautiful Savior:
Addressing the Sheep and the Goats
Mt. 25:31-46

-- CEFC 12/19/21

Why did God do it that way?

I mean, if God really wanted us to believe in him,

and to follow Jesus as his Son,

why was he born in the village of Bethlehem and placed in a manger?

Why not go for maximum exposure in one of the big media markets--

like Jerusalem, Athens, or even Rome? /

And why Mary and Joseph?

They had no contacts, no connections.

Why wasn't Jesus born to a prominent family with political promise?

Just think about it—

why did the angels address just a few shepherds?

Why not broadcast the news to the whole world all at once?

God Almighty--the great ruler of heaven and earth--

coming incognito into our midst,

not simply disguised as, but in fact becoming, a mere baby,

lying in a bed of straw among sheep and goats.

If you weren't looking for him,

you would never in a million years expect to find him there. /

And Jesus' life was like that throughout--

From the crib to the cross,

he didn't live the life of a superstar, a celebrity.

He was just humble carpenter,

a traveling Rabbi, preaching the Kingdom of God among the poor.

He hardly looked like a Messiah, the Savior of the world--

he couldn't even save himself.

He was *Deus absconditus*—as they say in Latin—"the hidden God"--

a God perceived only through the eyes of faith--

not coming with magnificent displays of divine glory--

but in humility and lowliness.

He was there alright--men and women stared God in the face—

As Jesus himself said, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father."

But most didn't recognize him, and most didn't respond to him.

The Jesus of Christmas--

a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

It's the only image many people ever have of Jesus.

There's nothing wrong with that nativity picture, of course--

it's entirely biblical.

But stripped of its theological context and put in a shop window--
the great truth of which it speaks becomes something very different.
Jesus becomes a doll with which we decorate our homes--
or he becomes a mere symbol of some vague human ideal--
"peace on earth, good will toward men."

And that's all Jesus is to millions of people--
a figure to be displayed in December
and then taken down and put back in a box after Christmas.

God incognito--

Jesus in the manger--
most people have no idea what they are looking at. //

But the Bible assures us that the divine glory of Jesus Christ
will not always be held in check--
his true identity will not always remain disguised in humility.

One day it will burst out in all its brilliance,
in all its blinding brightness it will blaze for all the world to see.
Everybody will know exactly who he is then
when Jesus, the Son of Man, sits upon his glorious throne
as Judge of all.

We find this truth set forth for us at the end of Mt. 25
where Jesus is talking to his followers about the end to come.

And three things stand out in what he says to them--

1. The reality of judgment

2. The identity of the judge

3. The basis of the verdict

As we consider these three realities in the teaching of Jesus,

let's allow his words to open our eyes

to see the fuller meaning of Christmas this year.

First, the reality of judgment--

There are few places in Scripture in which

the stark reality of that great final judgment is so graphically displayed

as in this powerful passage.

Jesus uses language familiar to his first-century audience.

For they knew that every night,

it was the shepherd's job to separate the more fragile goats

from the hardy sheep

so that he can put the former under cover at night.

And in the same way, Jesus says,

people from all nations will stand before a glorious throne

to be divided into two groups--

those who are blessed and those who are cursed.

As Jesus tells us in v. 46, some will go to eternal life

and some to eternal punishment.

Those on the right will hear the glorious King say to them--

**"Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance,
the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world."**

But those on the left will hear the most frightening words imaginable--

**"Depart from me, you who are cursed,
into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels."**

Some will go to eternal life

and some to eternal punishment.

The Day of Judgment—

it's a sobering prospect, isn't it--

certainly, something I'd rather not talk about,

if I didn't find it so clearly proclaimed here by Jesus himself.

Some will go to eternal life

and some to eternal punishment.

Have you thought about the reality of this final judgment lately?

Amidst all the busyness of Christmas--

with cards to send, parties to attend, and gifts to buy--

have you considered that this is ultimately what it's all about?

Ultimately, this is what all of life is all about--

the final judgment of God--

Some will go to eternal life

and some to eternal punishment.

God has created us in his own image to be responsible moral creatures.

Our lives are highly valued in God's sight--

so much so, that he considers them worthy of his judgment.

Our choices matter;

they matter eternally.

God sets before each one of us two roads--

the narrow and the wide.

He presents us with two ways--

the way of life and the way of death.

And there's no other way.

It will be one or the other.

Will you be numbered among the sheep

or among the goats?

Think about it this Christmas--

The reality of judgment--

it is inescapable

its consequences will be eternal.

Look again at that little baby in the manger.

This message of Christmas has eternal significance,

first, because of the reality of judgment.

And let's consider, second,

the identity of the Judge.

Consider who it is who exercises this judgment--

v. 31--"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him,
he will sit on his glorious throne.

All the nations will be gathered before him,
and he will separate the people one from another
as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats."

Who is the Judge?

It will be the Son of Man—

a term Jesus used to refer to himself.

Now think about this--

Three times up to this point in the Gospel story,

Jesus had told his disciples that he, the Son of man,
must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders,
chief priests and teachers of the law,
and that he would be mocked and flogged and crucified.

And at the beginning of chap. 26, we read--

"When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples,
'As you know, the Passover is two days away--
and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified."

This very Son of Man, who was born in a manger,
and who, in his life, had no place to lay his head--
this very Son of man who was rejected and ridiculed,
mocked and then crucified--
he is the one who will come in glory,
and all his angels with him,
to sit on his throne in heavenly glory to separate the peoples in judgment.

That same Son of Man who died on a cross and rose again from the grave—
he will return as God's glorious King,
with an authority and honor that will be recognized by all.
He will be recognized by the whole world as the King that he is.

The Apostle Paul tells us that on that day every knee shall bow
and every tongue confess that Jesus is "Lord"--
and so they do here in the story Jesus tells.

Everyone calls him "Lord"—
"Lord," they say, "when did we see you hungry, and thirsty, and in need?"
But for those on his **left**, calling him "Lord" then
will not be enough;
that recognition will come too late.

Where was that submission, that allegiance, when Jesus' glory
was not a public fact—
when Jesus was just known as a humble Galilean,
crucified by the Romans?
Where was that confession when Jesus called everyone to deny themselves

and to follow him in faith,
taking up their cross and living lives of humble obedience before God?

Who claimed him as their Lord then,
when he came in weakness and humility?

The identity of that glorious Judge makes us look again
at that helpless babe in the manger
who became that despised man on the cross--
for, you see, God has given that man the highest place of honor
in all his creation.

He will come as the Judge of all--
separating the sheep from the goats, our passage tells us.

Consider the identity of the Judge.

It is Jesus—the same Jesus whose humble birth we celebrate at Christmas.

The reality of the judgment;
the identity of the Judge.

Finally,
consider **the basis of the verdict.**

Why is one group commended and the other condemned?

At first glance it seems to be simply because of the performance or absence
of certain acts of kindness to those in distress.

But look again--

vv. 35-37--

"I was hungry and you gave me something to eat,
I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink,
I was a stranger and you invited me in,
I needed clothes and you clothed me,
I was sick and you looked after me,
I was in prison and you came to visit me."

Note the repeated use of the pronoun "I" and "me" to refer to Jesus himself.

The words occur 12 times in these three verses.

The emphasis here is not on the deeds, but on their recipient--

whom these things were done for.

The basis of the verdict is not simply what one has done

but what one has done for Jesus.

Yes, he will come in glory for all to see--

and how you respond to him then won't matter.

Jesus says, our eternal destiny hinges on how we respond to him now;

without his angelic entourage,

without the loud trumpet announcing his triumphant arrival--

but in his humility and lowliness,

as the Messiah who was born in a manger

and who died on a cross. /

"But Jesus," some may say, "you've been up in heaven for nearly 2000 years.

What opportunity have I had to respond to you?

When have I ever seen you?

When did you ever require anything of me?"

Here's Jesus' answer--

v. 40 "**whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine,
you did for me."**

Your response to them is your response to me.

I've been there all this time, incognito,

in a sense, just as I was as that baby in the manger.

A hidden God—

veiled--

present like the prince who leaves his palace

to enter his kingdom in the clothes of a pauper.

I have been there all the time. //

But who are these "**brothers of mine**" who represent Jesus to the world?

This is a debated point among students of these passages,

Some argue that Jesus is identifying himself

with the poor, the downtrodden, and the oppressed,

whoever they may be.

And the picture of Jesus we see in the rest of the Gospel

supports this conception,

for Jesus constantly loves the unlovable and defends the defenseless.

He makes the outcasts of society his closest friends--

the objects of his special concern.

He came to seek and to save the lost.

We see this idea in the Old Testament, too--

In the book of Proverbs, we read--

**"Whoever oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker,
but whoever is kind to the needy honors God" (14:31).**

And again, **"Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the LORD,**

and he will reward them for what they have done"¹ (19:17).

Have you honored Christ by honoring those he has a special concern for?

Have you encountered the Christ of the crib and of the cross--

the Christ who is found where you least expect him--

not in the prosperous and the powerful

but in the poor, and the imprisoned,

or in the homeless who have no place to lay their heads.

"For in as much as you have done it for the least of these,

you've done it for me."

This is how we encounter the Christ of Christmas.

But there is another way to view Jesus' words--

¹Irenaeus juxtaposed this passage with Mt.25:34, as did Clement of Alexandria (cf. Davies and Alison, 3.430, n.59). Cf. Also Deut. Rab. on 15.9--"when you gave food to the poor, I counted it as though you had given it to me." cf. also 2En. 44:1,2; 1En. 72:1.

a way which in the context may be slightly more likely,
though perhaps not as obvious.

In this view, Jesus' **"brothers"** are his followers;

they are Christians.

They are Jesus' lowly disciples who will suffer for their faith

in their missionary activity

as they take the gospel to all nations.

They are men and women like the Apostle Paul--

who was hungry and thirsty

a stranger in foreign lands,

who was even put in prison and then killed for his witness to Jesus.

"How have you treated the likes of them?" Jesus will ask.

The strength of this view comes not only from the fact that the term

"brothers of Jesus" elsewhere in the Gospel refers only to his disciples,

but also from Jesus' own description of Christians

as his representatives in this world.

Jesus said to his brothers, his disciples,

"You will be my witnesses—go and tell others about me" (Matt. 28:19-20; Acts 1:8)

And **"Whoever receives you, receives me"** (Matt. 10:40).

"And if anyone gives a cup of cold water to one of these little ones

because he is my disciple,

I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward" (10:40,42).

So for nearly 2000 years, followers of Jesus

have gone out carrying his message to the whole world.

and often they have been maligned and mistreated,

persecuted and sometimes jailed for their faith in Christ—

just as Jesus said they would be.

So in the context, Jesus may be referring more specifically

to those who go out in his name, as his representatives—

proclaiming the gospel to all nations.

How have you responded to the simple and lowly ways

that this message of Jesus Christ has come to you?

In the humble ways that Jesus reveals himself?

In these lowly brothers and sisters of his?

Did you receive his messengers or ignore them?

Did you help the cause of Christ or did you hinder it?

For when one is confronted by the message of Jesus,

there is no such thing as neutrality.

The Kingdom of God comes with definite claims upon every person.

To ignore these claims is to reject them

and to reject them is to side with the enemy--

“the devil and his angels” our text says.²

These words can be a very real comfort

to those who take discipleship seriously.

For those who follow in Jesus' steps may be treated just as he was.

² cf. Mt. 10:11-15--the rejection of the messengers results in judgment

But Jesus is saying, "Just wait.

Your faithfulness will be vindicated.

For when I am seated on my throne, you will be right beside me--

and whatever was done to you, I assure you,

will be treated as if it was done to me."

There are those in this world today who need to know

that when they are suffering for the cause of Christ,

they do not suffer alone,

nor will their suffering be forgotten.

They will stand as the "**brothers of Jesus**" when he comes in all his glory.

But however one interprets the "**brothers of Jesus**" here,

the thrust of the passage is the same.

There are but two destinies--

for Jesus Christ will come in his glory

to separate the people one from another

as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats,

and the basis of that verdict is ultimately one's response to him

as he encounters us in places and people we don't expect.

For we all need a Savior—

and that's why he's come—

that's what the angel declared to the shepherds—

'**Today in the city of David, a Savior has been born—**

he is Christ the Lord." /

As we close this morning I want you to think again about three things--

1. The reality of judgment--

Are settled in your own soul on where you will stand
when that final separation is made?

Will it be eternal life?

or will it be eternal punishment?

I want to make you think about that for a moment--

because I'm afraid that if I don't make you think about it
nobody else will.

And there can be nothing more important to consider.

The reality of judgment.

And there's something else I want you to think about--

2. The identity of the Judge—it is Jesus Christ.

Christmas is coming--we all know that--only five more shopping days left.

But much more important than that--Jesus Christ is coming again.

And unlike Christmas,

we do not know the day or the hour when he will come,

Only those found faithful to him will be allowed into the wedding banquet,

only they will share in the blessing and joy of the Kingdom.

As you make all your preparations for celebrating Christmas,

let me ask you,

Are you prepared for his coming?

Are you looking forward to that day?

Do you know him?

Will you follow him?

Jesus Christ--he's coming in glory.

3. Finally, I want you to think about how you are to encounter Jesus Christ.

When you look at that baby in the manger, what do you see?

Do you tip your hat out of respect,

or get sentimental feelings about the Christmas Spirit--

and then turn aside and concern yourself

with the more important people in the world--

people who can help you get ahead,

people who have something to offer you--money or pleasure or power?

Don't forget--

the message of good news won't come to you in your Facebook newsfeed.

It won't be announced by Wolf Blitzer or Shawn Hannity.

Don't let Jesus catch you by surprise

when you stand before him on the last day--

that day when you come before his throne

and you look upon him as your Judge.

If you are a believer here this morning, consider that fact and take comfort--

For the One who will sit on that throne as your Judge

is already your Savior.

You know his love, his mercy--he is already your good shepherd,

your high priest,

your elder brother.

When you see him on his throne

you have nothing to be afraid of.

He will receive you as one of his own.

Consider the identity of the Judge.

If you are not a believer, consider it and be fearful--

How else should you feel at the thought of being confronted

by the one you have rejected?

the one whose constant invitations you have persistently refused?

One day you will stand before Jesus--

those who fail to receive him as their Savior now

will have cause to fear when they face him as their Judge.

But I must return to the question we began with—

why does God do it this way?

Why does he hide his identity?

Why does he come under the radar screen,
unannounced by *CNN* or the *Washington Post*?
often in the form of the poor or the unpopular?

God hasn't given us answers to all the "Why?" questions we ask.

We're often left to speculation.

But C.S. Lewis, an Englishman writing just after World War II,
gives one answer that is as good as any.

Lewis uses the imagery of war,
with this world as territory now occupied by the Evil One.

"Why is God landing in this enemy-occupied world in disguise
and starting a sort of secret society to undermine the devil?"

Lewis asks.

Why is He not landing in [full] force, invading it [with guns blazing]?

Is it that He is not strong enough?

Well, Christians think He is going to land in force;

we do not know when.

But we can guess why He is delaying.

He wants to give us the chance of joining His side freely.

I do not suppose, Lewis writes, you and I would have thought much
of a Frenchman who waited till the Allies were marching into Germany
and then announced he was on our side.

(It's like waiting to see who wins the SuperBowl

before deciding which team you will root for.—

that's my illustration, not Lewis's!)

God will invade.

But I wonder, Lewis writes, whether people who ask God to interfere
openly and directly in our world
quite realize what it will be like when He does.

When that happens, it is the end of the world.

When the author walks on to the stage the play is over.

God is going to invade, all right:

but what is the good of saying you are on His side then,
when you see the whole natural universe melting away like a dream
and something else—something it never entered your head to conceive—
comes crashing in;
something so **beautiful** to some of us
and so **terrible** to others
that none of us will have any choice left?

For this time it will be God without disguise;

something so overwhelming that it will strike either irresistible love
or irresistible horror into every creature.

It will be too late then to choose your side.

There is no use saying you choose to lie down
when it has become impossible to stand up.

That will not be the time for choosing:

it will be the time when we discover
which side we really have chosen,
whether we realised it before or not.

Now, today, this moment, is our chance to choose the right side.

God is holding back to give us that chance.

It will not last forever."³ /

Are you waiting for God to reveal himself

in some new and spectacular way before you will take sides?

That's not the way God would have it.

No, he's come incognito into our midst--

becoming a mere baby,

lying in a bed of straw in a cattle stall in Bethlehem,

then dying on a Roman cross in Jerusalem.

And he continues to come to us—

not in the high and the mighty,

not in the celebrity superstars of our culture—

but sometimes in some poor and persecuted people

who dare to speak for him in the world,

even when no one seems to want to listen.

Jesus may not be found at a press conference on Capitol Hill

or at a media event at Tysons Corner.

He has a strange habit of dropping into our lives unannounced,

unexpectedly,

incognito.

³ *Mere Christianity*, pp. 65,66.

He may even come to us in people we'd rather avoid.

That's God's way.

There's no use wishing he'd done it differently.

We must take what he offers us.

The question is--

Will you take notice of the way God has revealed himself?--

He has come in humility;

He has come looking for humble hearts who will receive him.

Will you respond to him now?

The light has come into the world,

but, as someone has said,

God "came down the backstairs at Bethlehem,

"lest he blind us by the brilliance of that light."⁴

At Christmas, God has given us the gift of himself,

giving us all the light we need.

What more are you looking for?

Don't let him catch you by surprise

when you stand before him on the last day.

⁴from a quote by George Buttrick.

Prayer--

*How silently, holy silently the wondrous gift is given.
So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven.
No ear may hear his coming, But in this world of sin
Where meek souls will receive Him still,
the dear Christ enters in.*

Lord, you have hidden your glory from us
to make room for our response of love and faith.

You do not overwhelm us,
so that we can choose you for yourself.
Lord, open our eyes and our hearts--

Closing Hymn: #137 *What Child Is This?*

Benediction:

Jude 24,25 To him who is able to keep you from falling
and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy--
to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority,
through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.

Dec. 19, 2021

Our Beautiful Savior:
Addressing the Sheep and the Goats
(Mt. 25:31-46)

At Christmas, many people only think of Jesus as an infant in a manger—a rather harmless figure who can easily be put out of our minds. But one day this One born in Bethlehem will be revealed in all his glory for all the world to see. Our passage speaks to us of the judgment to come and the sober fact that our eternal destiny will hinge on how we have responded to him. We haven't understood the meaning of Christmas without an appreciation of this reality.

*“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, . . .
All the nations will be gathered before him,
and he will separate the people one from another
as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats” –Mt. 25:31-32*

I. The Reality of Judgment

II. The Identity of the Judge

III. The Basis of the Verdict

*"Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance,
the kingdom prepared for you
since the creation of the world."*

*"Depart from me, you who are cursed,
into the eternal fire
prepared for the devil and his angels."*