

THE LORD'S FINAL JUDGMENT

Matthew 25:31-46 is a passage where the reader must go deeper than surface meaning. The Scriptures speak about a judgment according to works in other places also. However, closer investigation of this passage reveals that the separation has occurred before the judgment begins. Besides, anyone, even unbelievers, can perform the works mentioned, feeding hungry people, giving a thirsty person a drink, taking a stranger into one's home, giving a destitute person something to wear, looking after the sick, and visiting a person in prison. Most unbelieving and wicked people visit their sick relatives in hospitals. Most people visit a friend or relative in jail. The judge does not mention sins that people have committed at all, but surely, if judgment is on the basis of works, all the works of those who have been impenitent must come up in the judgment. However, it is clear that favourable judgment on these great assizes does not take place because people have done good things from the fact that those on the judge's right are astonished when He tells them, "You have done it to Me." Those who are accused of sins of omission in relation to the Judge Himself cannot remember His ever needing their help.

We can think of many works of compassion that are similar to the ones the Judge mentions, giving money for blind dogs, donating to Care Australia, and the rest. Such good deeds come into the category of "civic righteousness", and may be done out of various motives. Some are done out of natural pity. Some are done out of a feeling of guilt. When some people feel that they are much better off than others are, who are destitute, they may give a token amount, to get the letter requesting help off the table, and carefully keep the receipt for a tax deduction. However, even when works are considered in the final judgment, what the Judge regards as important is that those works have been done to Him.

Other aspects of this section also make it clear that the basis for judgment of acquittal is not the Law, but the Gospel. The most welcome words anyone in this world can ever hope to hear are the ones the people on the right hand of the King will hear, "Come, you whom My Father has blessed, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the time the world was created." These are Gospel words. A person cannot earn what he inherits. In His teaching elsewhere Jesus also said that the kingdom is received; the kingdom is given. It cannot be earned.

There are other considerations. In this life, we are accustomed to the fact that it is impossible for human beings to know all the motives and aspects of personality in anyone else. Human courts can only judge what is external, deeds and words, and, in some cases, one's omission to do one's duty. However, there is nothing that is hidden from this Judge. The secrets of all hearts will be revealed. How embarrassing!

So what will go on in this very public affair? The Lord will demonstrate people's faith in Him by pointing to their works done to Him. Even the thief on the cross, not far from death, did good works after what he saw before His eyes moved him to faith in Jesus. When almost everyone else was mocking Jesus' claim to be what the title over His head said He was, "The King of the Jews", the thief believed that, at least in some long distant time, He would indeed "come into His kingdom." His good works were that he prayed, and that, amidst all that mockery, and when all appearances were to the contrary, he confessed that He was indeed a king, indeed, the King! He did not give Jesus a drink when He was thirsty, but prayer and confession of Christ are good works. Elsewhere the Scriptures teach that a dead faith is not a faith at all. Faith works through love. It is not that people are saved by faith provided that they have works. Though faith justifies alone, faith is never alone. When that thief appears for the judgment, relying of Jesus' promise, "Today you will be with Me in paradise", he will have been with the Lord for a long "time" between his death and the judgment. He will not have to await the Judge's decision nervously.

When we consider this account of the judgment we admit that we human beings cannot help thinking in terms of time. One thing happens after another. We get hung up on thoughts about all the millions of people who have lived since creation who will have to face the Judge individually. That would, in human terms, take many years to process. The people who have been condemned in the judgment are described in this passage as trying to influence the judge's verdict. There is a similar picture in the Sermon on the Mount, as people say, "Lord, Lord, did we not...?"

All will have to acquiesce in the Judge's verdict if it goes against them. There will probably be many grumbles. The rich man in Hades (Lk 16) still blamed God for not dealing in a sufficiently spectacular fashion with people to lead them to their absolutely necessary repentance. He thought that if God sent someone back from the dead to his brothers who were still on earth they would repent and avoid that place of torment. How terrible for anyone to have to face eternity in hell together with other people who also incessantly grumble against God!

We can safely leave to God the problem of time and eternity, and the gap in "time" that there seems to be

between the time of death and the resurrection for judgment, and the length of the judgment itself. We human beings cannot cope at all with the concept of eternity because we are locked into time in this existence. The Scriptures do not have a clear passage that tells us whether the judgment will be a long process. The passages that refer to lightning in the west that is immediately-seen in the east, and the “twinkling of an eye” refer to the suddenness of the end of the world and Jesus’ coming, not to the “time” the judgment will take. However, the fact that the “sheep” and the “goats” are already drafted points to the fact that the basic decision has already been made.

From the standpoint of God’s Law our whole lives are accountable to God. Even if people were once believers, and were forgiven in the past, everything will be held against them if they fall from the faith. It is significant that what Jesus refers to in this passage are not sins of commission, but sins of omission. Failure to do one’s duty is a sin. Moreover, from the standpoint of the Law, when we confess our sins, we are judging ourselves, and admitting ourselves that we have deserved God’s wrath and condemnation.

The parallel situation is true also for unbelievers. Jesus said, ‘The person who does not believe has already been condemned, because he has not believed in the name of God’s only Son.’ In that sense, no one will have to wait until judgment day to see how the verdict will fall for him. He simply has to ask himself whether he believes in the name of God’s only Son now.

There is an apparent contradiction. Scripture teaches plainly that all people without exception, the pious as well as the impious, will have to face judgment, and that the basis of judgment will be people’s works. We know that, because the believers are forgiven for Christ’s sake and because His righteousness is credited to them, their sins will not come into consideration. On the other hand, Holy Scripture says just as plainly that the believers will not come into judgment. Jesus said, “Truly, truly, I tell you that he who listens to My word and believes Him who has sent Me has eternal life, and will not come into judgment, but has passed over out of death into life.” The thought is expressed in another way in Revelation, “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on!” Believers should trust that they will be blessed from the moment when they die. They do not have to nervously wait until they appear before the Judge. How do these two things, “All will be judged”, and “Believers will not be judged” cohere?

It is the same contradiction between the Law and the Gospel that runs through the whole Bible. According to the Law all people must appear before the judgment-seat of Christ. According to the Gospel the believers will not come into condemnation. As they are justified now through faith alone, without works, they will be justified then also through faith alone, without works. From the standpoint of the Gospel, the judgment is merely pro forma. In this life even an innocent person faces trial in court with a certain amount of trepidation, because he or she does not know how the evidence will be made to appear in cross-questioning. However, believers face the final judgment with the certainty that this Judge will not pronounce an unjust verdict, because He is not only the Judge, but also the Substitute, whose obedience is reckoned to the accused. For His sake, believers look forward to a triumphant vindication.