

Pentecost Last: Matthew 25:31-46: The Final Judgment

1. In this series, the texts for Pentecost XIX-Pentecost Last (six texts) occurred on Tuesday of holy week, a very busy day in Jesus' life. The text for Pentecost XXIII was Jesus' final word to His adversaries. Then (still on Tuesday) followed Jesus' scathing (and well-deserved) denunciation of the scribes and Pharisees, spoken to the multitudes and His disciples, recorded at Mk. 12:38-40; Mt. 23:1-39 and Lk. 20:45-47. Then follows the account of the so-called widow's mite (Mk. 12:41-44; Lk. 21:1-4). In the afternoon of that Tuesday Jesus and His disciples went out to the Mt. of Olives where Jesus delivered His great eschatological discourse found at Mk. 13:1-37; Mt. 24 and 25; Lk. 21:5-36. Our text is the third of three parables: Of the Ten Virgins, Of the Talents, Of the Final Judgment, all three found only in Matthew.
2. Vs. 31: ὅταν-τότε. The only element unknown to us is the time. The last sentence in the Apostles' Creed is the only item yet to be completed: "He shall come again to judge the quick and the dead." "The Son of man" stresses Jesus' humanity. ἐν τῇ δόξῃ αὐτοῦ stresses His divinity, fully used by His humanity. αὐτοῦ is possessive. The human nature possesses this divinity. JB renders the next words "escorted by all the angels." ἐπὶ θρόνου δόξης αὐτοῦ "on His glorious throne", presents Christ as King, which term is used in vs. 34. αὐτοῦ is again possessive. It belongs to the glorified human nature of Christ.
3. Vs. 32: συναχθήσονται "will be gathered together" is passive. The righteous should have no fears of not being included and the unrighteous will have no choice. It's one meeting from which no human being will be absent. πάντα τὰ ἔθνη brings that out. Cf. πάντα τὰ ἔθνη at Mt. 28:19; Gal. 3:8 and Mt. 24:14. The justification of all men, in Christ, was prophesied in Gen. 12:3 and accomplished. The church was told to evangelize all nations and is promised that it will happen. And the final judgment will involve πάντα τὰ ἔθνη. Imagine all the holy angels and all human beings gathered into one place! But no mention is made of the presence of the devil and his angels. More on that later. Forms of ἀφορίζω, first in application, secondly by way of illustration. In this life sheep and goats are intermingled. Read Ezek. 34:7-26 where the sheep and goats, in this life, are intermingled but the sheep are promised The Shepherd, Christ. But in everlasting life sheep and goats will be separated once and forever from each other. A great comfort.
4. Vs. 33: Note τὰ μὲν and τὰ δὲ, contrast. Sheep and goats represent the redeemed and the damned. Note that αὐτοῦ occurs only with "the right". Is this significant? We think it is. Already Gen. 3:15 and 12:3 teach the universal atonement in Christ. It is a persistent truth throughout Scripture that God seriously desires the salvation of all men. Cf. 2 Pet. 3:9. He is a God of life, not of death. But if men reject salvation, justice requires adverse judgment. Therefore in Mt. 25:33 "His right hand" denotes His saving will, "the left hand" denotes His just judgment. By the way, the last day will involve only a judgment, not a trial. Commentators point out that it will involve only a public declaration of the personal or private judgment at the time of death. Cf. Lk. 23:43 and Hebr. 9:27. For those who are still living when Christ comes, private judgment and public declaration evidently will be identical. Among sinful mortals the determination of justice and judgment involves a trial, sometimes lengthy, laborious and even then sometimes not certain. The omniscient God-man needs no attorneys, trial or jury. Nor is His judgment arbitrary.
5. Vs. 34: Note progression of τότε in vss. 31, 34, 37, 41, 44, 45. It will be most orderly and plain for all to hear. Here the Son of man is called ὁ βασιλεὺς. In this life only the regenerate willingly regarded Him as The King. But on that great day ALL will see and hear Him as King. αὐτοῦ is repeated from vs. 33. Δεῦτε is an invitation. On this word and the whole thought compare Mt. 11:28.

They heeded this invitation during their lifetime. οἱ εὐλογημένοι is vocative case. τοῦ πατρὸς is subjective genitive. The Father blessed them. Cf. Eph. 1:3. μου is genitive of relation. Jesus is still incarnate, though glorified. κληρονομήσατε can mean only that they receive a gift attained for them by Christ. Cf. Rom. 8:17. "The Kingdom lastingly prepared for you." ὑμῖν is dative of advantage and βασιλείαν is eschatological, heaven, as at Lk. 21:31. "From the foundation of the world." It's ἀπὸ, not πρὸ. Election in Christ is πρὸ καταβολῆς κόσμου, Eph. 1:4, before time began. But heaven itself was created. When? On the seventh day, Gen. 2:2. That's the whole point of Hebr. 4:1-11. Read Jn. 14:1-3. Jesus says: "In My Father's House are many staying-places." The present creation will pass away, but not the Kingdom which has been prepared for you.

6. Vs. 35: γὰρ is not causal but evidential. The works of the blessed were evidence, not cause, of belonging to Christ. Cf. Lk. 7:46 where ὅτι is evidential, not causal. Her love for Jesus was evidence of the fact that many sins had been forgiven. Back to Mt. 25:35. The deeds in vss. 35-36 begin with a form of δίδωμι "to give". They were truly godly. Cf. Jn. 3:16. Love causes giving. Note μοι, to Jesus. φαγεῖν is an infinitive used as a noun. In vss. 35-36 Jesus is the recipient six times, as if He were the only human being. συνηγάγετε is variously rendered "you welcomed me, you made me welcome, you invited me into your homes." Hospitality is proof of true love. Snubbing the needy is its opposite. On the former cf. Hebr. 13:2 and on the latter, Lk. 16:21.
7. Vs. 36: γυμνός can also mean "lacking proper clothing". In the NT forms of ἐπισκέπτομαι always mean visitation because of need. Cf. Lk. 1:68; 7:16. It denotes a Christ-like deed. The word "prison" here has overtones of persecution. Cf. Hebr. 13:3. But, in any case, it's utter destitution. πρὸς denotes close association. The deeds in vss. 35-36 are those which can be performed by anyone, under ordinary circumstances. Simple deeds involving sacrifice.
8. Vs. 37: τότε corresponds to τότε in vs. 34. They are called οἱ δίκαιοι, a forensic word. Their sins are not mentioned. In Hebr. 11, where we have a catalog of OT believers, no sins are mentioned. Only deeds done in faith are mentioned. Three times in vss. 37-39 they say πότε "when?" All the questions are questions of surprise and astonishment. Christians don't dwell on their deeds of love. The Christian's whole life is summed up in "faith which works through love", Gal. 5:6. Through the Gospel he lives in constant freedom in his conscience. At the same time, the Law obligates him to be servant to his neighbor. Gal. 5:13-14. He constantly tests his own life, without comparing himself with others, and yet has his boast toward himself because, by God's grace, he lives in freedom of conscience toward self and in love toward neighbor. Gal. 6:4. But Christians ought not dwell on their deeds of love. If they do they need to listen to Gal. 6:3. Note that vss. 37-39 are almost a verbatim rehearsal of vss. 35-36, in question form.
9. Vs. 40: Note ὁ βασιλεὺς again. Cf. vs. 34. He is called "The King" only when He addresses those who are called the blessed, the heirs, the righteous, those who throughout their lifetime did good to Him. he says "In very truth I say to you" which is always used of an unalterable truth uttered by the incarnate Christ. ἐφ' ὅσον denotes degree, "to the extent that". "To one of my brothers, the least." Good deeds come one by one to one by one. Read Mk. 9:41. Furthermore, read Rev. 14:13. The deeds of Christians follow them and are never forgotten. Unbelievers start with the delusion of big things which attract attention but will be rejected. Mt. 7:21-23. Believers start with the little things for the least but do not dwell on them. Some quotes on this verse: Ylvisaker: "They have not counted their acts. They have not kept them in memory, they have not mirrored their lives in their works. Their deeds have not been performed to gain honor and veneration among men. However, these unselfish acts are not forgotten, for they are recorded by Him whose book is complete to the minutest detail. . . . Every generous act shall follow them into eternity. . . . Jesus informs us in this

word that He considers all deeds that are wrought in faith and love, as done for Him personally. . . . Jesus lives in those that are His, their cause is His cause. Such is the high standing of His believers." Stoeckhardt: "The Lord remembers only the good works of the believers, although they did many things in their lifetime which they should not have done, because through faith they have forgiveness of sins, and what God forgives, He remembers no more, it is eternally forgiven." Bengel: "Of the least, outwardly, or even inwardly. . . . Not 'to Me' only but 'to Me' absolutely." Lenski: "So close is the union between true believers and Christ, but its glorious nature will not appear until the King declares this his identification with his brethren before the whole universe." Cf. Jn. 15:5; Gal. 2:20.

10. Vs. 41: τότε again. καὶ is "also". They will not be left without witness, but the word "King" does not appear here. Every tongue will confess that He is Lord, but He does not regard Himself as King for unbelievers. See Philippians 2:11. Those on the left do not belong to the Kingdom and Christ does not call Himself their King. We noted above that the word αὐτοῦ is not used with the term "on the left". On this Fahling comments: "Before God there is no predetermined 'left hand' meaning eternal damnation, but only a 'right hand' signifying life everlasting. It is really an upsetting of God's plan that 'any should perish' (2 Pet. 3:9). Since, however, men wilfully transgressed His commandments, punishment became necessary, justice must be executed. Sternly the Judge addresses Himself to those at the left. . . . The Judge takes no pleasure in its pronouncement." πορεύεσθε is the opposite of δεῦτε, vs. 34. Cf. Mt. 7:23. He is attracted by the blessed. He is repelled by the cursed. Just as εὐλογημένοι vs. 34, is perfect passive, so is κατηραμένοι here. It denotes a lasting judgment pronounced at the time of death. By the way, Christians believe that Christ was cursed in their stead, Gal. 3:13. Unbelievers, who reject this, must bear their own curse. Fahling remarks: "He does not say 'Cursed of My Father' for they brought the curse upon themselves. Neither does He say 'prepared from the beginning of the world'. God's original plan did not call for the damnation of anyone. The 'left hand' was a later addition, prepared only for the devil." And on the final words in this verse, Bengel remarks: "At the time of this judgment the devil (and his angels) will be already in hell. Rev. 20:10-13; 2 Pet. 3:6-7." Note the three articles with "fire" and its modifiers: "into THE fire, THE eternal, THE one lastingly prepared for THE deceiver and THE angels of him." αὐτοῦ, genitive of relation and distinguished from those mentioned in vs. 31. The devil and his angels were judged already in Eden. Gen. 3:15; Lk. 10:18. For them there is no repentance nor do they want it, for they are incorrigibly wicked. Jn. 8:44. Since Satan and his angels are not mentioned as present at the judgment, likely Bengel is right.
11. Vs. 42: As in vs. 35, γὰρ is evidential. The humble deeds of the blessed are evidence of what they are. Likewise, the total lack of even humble deeds of the cursed are evidence of what they are. Read Rom. 2:1-11, a good commentary on our text. In vss. 35-36 Jesus says "You did-did-did." In vss. 42-43 He says "you didn't-didn't-didn't."
12. Vs. 44: Another τότε. καὶ means "also". Though condemned, they call Him κύριε, Lord. The only thing which the blessed and the cursed will have in common is the address κύριε. Precisely what Paul says at Philippians 2:11. But He is not called their King. We make two observations on this verse: 1) In vss. 37-39 the righteous asked "when?" three times in surprise and astonishment. But in vs. 44 the condemned ask "when?" only once, evidently in a spirit of reprimand, reproach and accusation. Commentators agree that in vs. 44 the speakers are trying to place the blame on the Lord; 2) It is likely not an accident that in vs. 44 the question is asked in an abbreviated form, compared with what Jesus said in vss. 42-43. This perhaps indicates that it is not important to them. Ylvisaker says: "They will not hear of any neglect on their part. They would excuse themselves and heap the responsibility on His shoulders who has even now pronounced sentence upon them. . . . Their words contain a grave accusation. God has not done enough for them. . . . The devil and the lost do not

desire to return to the righteousness and the bliss of the sanctified." Stoeckhardt: "From their evil works the Lord proves that they did not believe. What weighs heaviest against them is the evil they did to the Christians." Fahling: "Nor is there a chance given for many of them to point with pride to the erection of hospitals and institutions, to the creation of funds, endowments, and memorials to the honor and glory of their name. . . . It was the neglect of true charity and the small deeds of Christian love which testified to their lack of faith and love of Christ. . . . Such love as they showed was unsanctified love such as is found in natural man." Bengel: "The ignorance of the wicked and their endeavor to justify themselves will persist into eternity."

13. Vs. 45: Cf. Jesus' answer here and in vs. 40: 1) He does not call Himself the King, for He is not their King, nor are they members of His Kingdom; 2) Note the double negatives which are correlative οὐκ-οὐδέ "not-neither"; 3) This time Jesus does not say τῶν ἀδελφῶν μου. Bengel remarks: "The wicked are ignorant of the relation which the righteous stand in to Christ, and will remain so." The unregenerate remain spiritually dead in their trespasses and sin, Eph. 2:1-2. In God's sight his deeds are worthless. He hates the Light and won't come to the Light lest his works be shown up for what they are. Jn. 3:20. Their love was selfish. They did what they did only for reward from men. Lk. 6:32. They must depart from Jesus for all their works are considered wickedness. Mt. 7:22.
14. Vs. 46: This verse readily explains itself. The condemned are merely called "these" but the faithful are again called οἱ δίκαιοι. They are righteous not because of their works but because they believed what God, in Christ, did for them. The good works are plain evidence of this believing relationship. The punishment of the wicked is justice because they rejected God. The blessedness of the righteous is just because by faith they are οἱ δίκαιοι.
15. *Apology*, Art. IV, Justification, Tappert page 163, paragraphs 370-374: "Our opponents (the Church of Rome) urge that good works properly merit eternal life, since Paul says (Rom. 2:6) 'He will render to every man according to his works' and vs. 10: 'Glory and honor and peace for every one who does good'. Jn. 5:29: 'Those who have done good will come forth to the resurrection of life'; Mt. 25:35: 'I was hungry and you gave me food' etc. These passages and all others like them where works are praised in the Scriptures must be taken to mean not only outward works but also the faith of the heart, since the Scriptures do not speak of hypocrisy but of righteousness in the heart and of its fruits. Whenever law and works are mentioned, we must know that Christ, the mediator, should not be excluded. He is the end of the law (Rom. 10:4), and he himself says 'Apart from me you can do nothing' (Jn. 15:5). By this rule, as we have said earlier, all passages on works can be interpreted. Therefore, when eternal life is granted to works, it is granted to the justified. None can do good works except the justified, who are led by the Spirit of Christ; nor can good works please God without the mediator Christ and faith, according to Hebr. 11:6 'Without faith it is impossible to please God.' When Paul says 'He will render to every man according to his works' we must understand not merely outward works but the entire righteousness or unrighteousness. That is to say 'Glory for him who does good' namely, for the righteous man. 'You gave me food' (Mt. 25:35) is cited as fruit and evidence of the righteousness of the heart and its fruit. They often mention the fruit to make it clearer to the inexperienced and to show that a new life and new birth are required, not hypocrisy. Such a new birth comes by faith amid penitence."
16. *Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration*, Art. IV, Good Works, Tappert, pages 551-558, is good background reading for this text. After Luther's death, Lutheran theologians got into a controversy about the good works of a Christian. The question was: "Are good works necessary to salvation?" To make a long story short, they are not necessary in a meritorious sense nor are they detrimental to salvation. But they are necessary as evidence and fruit of faith.

17. Remember Luther's adage: "Faith alone saves but faith is never alone."
18. This text ought make a pastor aware of his great responsibility of properly applying and distinguishing Law and Gospel.

Feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.
Acts 20:28