

When the Son of Man Comes

The gospel for this coming Sunday (Last Sunday of the Church Year) is Matthew 25:31-46. This text is a Parable of the Final Judgment.

The great Shepherd who separates the sheep from the goats (v. 32) once said: “He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters” (12:30). The separation takes place before any deeds are mentioned. Whether a person has been against him or for him has been documented by that person’s deeds—deeds of mercy done or left undone. The merciful will find mercy in the judgment, as Jesus had promised (5:7)—and mercy it is; for the Judge buries all their failures in forgiving silence and remembers only their deeds of mercy. The unmerciful have committed themselves to the unmerciful enemy of God and share his doom, that *eternal fire* (v. 41) which God did not design for human beings.

Kingdom of God parables are abundant in the chapters before our text. In ch 24 Jesus speaks about the signs of the end of the age. In 24:36 Jesus talks about the day and hour unknown. Ch 25 contains three end-time parables. The parable of the sheep and the goats is the last of the three. The chapter begins with the parable of the ten virgins followed by the parable of the talents. These are, of course, popular sermon texts for the Last Sunday of the Church Year.

All of this falls within the last week of Jesus’ life. It makes sense that these teachings of Jesus are quickly followed by events that lead to his cross.

“Son of Man” is a self-designation Jesus uses many times in the New Testament. The phrase occurs 85 times in the New Testament. The large number is indicative of a common self-description of our Lord.

Every single human being who ever lived or ever will live is going to be present. No excuses, No exceptions. It staggers the imagination. “Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake” (Daniel 12:2). Just think what it will be like to be in the Arlington National Cemetery when Jesus comes back!

Sheep and goats are not described as being judged on this day, but rather separated. Accordingly, this parable is not primarily about judgment but about the revelation and public vindication of true believers.

Rewards in the kingdom of heaven are given to those who serve without thought of reward. There is no hint of merit here, for God gives out of grace, not debt.

Having received forgiveness through faith in Christ, we eagerly await the day on which they shall be publicly vindicated and receive eternal life.

Note the sequence: first the call to the sheep with the granting of the inheritance, and then the description of their works. Blessed is the key. The sheep are called first, not as a result of any works, but solely because of the Father’s grace. Blessed is a Gospel word.

Interestingly, those called righteous are surprised at what is being said about them. Far from being boastful about the good deeds worked in them by God’s Spirit, they are completely ignorant of them.

Prayer: Grant us a faith that perseveres until the end, O Lord. Move us by Your Spirit, that our good works continually glorify you and benefit our neighbors. Amen. (TLSB)