

ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH

MARCH 10, 2024 JUDGEMENT SUNDAY

MATTHEW 25: 31-46

“AM I A SHEEP OR A GOAT?”

In his older years, the great pioneer leader of Kentucky, Daniel Boone, moved farther west—Kentucky had become too civilized for him. His last years were spent in Missouri, to where the frontier had shifted. He built himself a beautiful coffin which he kept right in his house. Whenever he had visitors come he would show them this coffin. And then he would crawl in to show them how well he fit in it. This was partly perhaps a way to show off his craftsmanship a little. But also maybe a way to issue a warning---that they would all one day go into a coffin, too!

Today in our Orthodox Church, the second Sunday before Lent, is called Judgement Sunday. That is because our gospel lesson (Matthew 25: 31-46) is a reminder (like Boone’s coffin) that one day each of us will stand before the Judgement Seat of Almighty God. The world will end and all who have ever lived will be judged that day. Who will sit on the Judgement Seat? Our gospel reading makes it very plain---our Lord Jesus Christ. It is the judge Himself who in this passage tells us what Judgement Day will be like! When will it be? That we don’t know. But we know the judge will be our Lord Jesus—it’s plain as day in this reading.

We just heard in this reading about how on that day Christ will separate the sheep from the goats. The sheep will be on his right hand---they will go to heaven. The goats will be on his left hand—they will go to hell.

This reading obviously raises a big persona question for each of us-----Will I be a sheep or a goat? If a goat, I will hear the dreadful words of the Lord in verse 41—“Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.” If I am a sheep, I will hear the blessed words of verse 34----“Come, O blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.”

What criteria with the Judge use that day? Well, the Judge Himself tells us in this reading! That’s why it’s such a powerful passage---a preview of how He will judge us! Now there are other passages in the Bible about Judgement Day, and there are perhaps other aspects of that day not covered here in Matthew 25. Maybe this is not the entire story of that coming day. But....being it’s Jesus the Judge Himself telling us what the criteria of judgement will be, we can be sure this is the *main* thing that will happen that day----just what Jesus says will happen in these verses.

And what He says here is clear as can be----on that day the Lord will judge us by how we

have helped, or not helped, the poor and needy. What have we done for the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the stranger, the sick, the imprisoned? That's what He will judge us by. Maybe that doesn't fit our thinking? Well, it fits the Lord's thinking!

All we have here-----our possessions, our health, our success, our power, our popularity----it won't be worth a hill of beans on that day! The old saying is very true----"you can't take it with you!".

The great Russian writer of the late 1800's, Anton Chekhov, talks about this truth in a story called "Gooseberries". (in The Best Short Stories of Chekhov, Fawcett Press, 1974) There was a prosperous Russian merchant who was incredibly stingy. He had lots of money but would never give a cent to anyone in need or do a good deed for anyone. He lived only for himself. He got old and was just the same. His health failed and he was just the same. His friends urged him to get ready for death and judgement by starting to help others before he died. After all, all his money would soon be of no use to him. They said to him, "You can't take it with you!" It irritated him when they kept saying that, so one day he said, "You are wrong! I *will* take it with me!" And then he asked them to do a couple of favors. He instructed them to take all his money he had hoarded in his house and take it to his bank. Then withdraw for him all the money he had in his bank. Then have the bank change all his money (a lot!) into the biggest paper bills possible. Then bring him those bills and a bowl and a fork and a jar of honey and a scissors. They did all that for him. Then, as they watched in amazement he proceeded on his death bed to cut all the money into little shreds and put them in the bowl. He mixed a bunch of honey in with the cut-up money. And then he ate it all, while saying---"See, you are wrong! I *am* taking it with me!" Soon he died and he, with a stomach stuffed with money, was buried.

There is a better way to prepare for that future day of judgement than that---the better way is to heed Christ's words in Matthew 25. The better way is to be a sheep by helping the needy.

And many of you already do a lot to help those in need. I know that, as a priest, I am greatly blessed by God to have a parish that does so much for the poor! But we can, of course, do yet more. There are so many in need---it's increasing! Right here in our parish family, in our towns, in our country, in our world. Meanwhile, most of us (not all!) have more than we need. There are many hungry people---but we have too much food and have to diet! There are people without enough clothing---and we have to build bigger closets because we can't get all our clothes in our old closets. There are the homeless---and we live in bigger and bigger homes as the generations go by.

It's not that these material things are bad in themselves. But the more we have, the more spiritual danger we are in. And so it's a problem----some have so much that it's spiritually dangerous for them. But some simply don't have enough.

How solve this situation? The Lord tells us in today's gospel----give more to the poor and needy. So let each one of us ask ourselves-----what can I do to help the needy more? There are lots of ways----just look in the parish bulletin and you will see several ministries to the needy going on here. And, of course, there are many great charity works going on outside our church. And then there's that relative or neighbor you know that needs help? And there's that fellow on the corner or on the freeway ramp with the little cardboard sign..... Many ways to help! One way that has become very frequent is also very easy----you buy a grocery gift card and bring it to the church and it goes quickly to folks needing help. Or you can give money to our alms fund and it will go anonymously to help those among us needing a boost. No shortage of ways to help the needy!

And when you do, remember you are giving to Jesus Christ Himself. St. Gregory the Theologian, our great spiritual father from the 4th century (one of only 3 men that our Church officially calls a "Theologian") wrote these words-----"Christ becomes for you a stranger, a person without clothes, without food, without health. A prisoner, or someone who is homeless, naked, sick, needy. So long as there is time, let us decide to visit this Christ, to feed Christ, to clothe Christ, to *treasure* Christ." (quoted in Diakonia, John Chryssavgis, Holy Cross Press, 2009, p. 25)

So...if you can't take it with you.....and if helping the needy is helping Christ....and if He is going to ask us about it on Judgement Day-----then it's time to go into action! So give it some thought---can you be one of our Lay Visitors visiting our shut-ins?; can you help with one of our various ministries to the poor?; can you give so that more giving to the needy can take place?

As I briefly mentioned already, a very good way to help is by giving to our discretionary parish alms fund. Help in this way can go quickly to those needing it right here. You can do that through our treasurer or just see me. Simple and direct. And it's all handled carefully and anonymously. You could be a big blessing in the Name of the Lord!

Let me draw towards a close by sharing with you a bit of a sermon from the greatest preacher in history (and the author of our main liturgy)—St. John Chrysostom, about 1600 years ago. Before he was made the archbishop of Constantinople he was a parish priest in Antioch in Syria. He pastored the main parish in Antioch-----a big and beautiful place! But he considered the great treasure of the parish to be the beggars who would gather outside the church doors, hoping for help. In one his sermons (we have literally hundreds of them still today) he told the parishioners that they were neglecting those beggars sent to the church by God. They just weren't helping them enough! He commended them for their great love for Christ and talked about how they loved to receive Holy Communion out of their love for Christ. But.....after taking Communion, after that close contact with the Lord----they would walk out the church doors and see Christ, in those beggars, standing right in front of them. And often they would just ignore them and walk coldly right by Jesus on their way home!

We don't have beggars at our church door! But there are people needing help in our parish family and outside of it. May we not just "walk by" them but help Christ by helping them.

Be Christ's friend by helping Him when He comes to you in someone needing help. Because as we heard so clearly in today's gospel-----He comes to us in the needy. Help the Lord by helping those in need-----and on Judgement Day, the Judge Himself will be your friend and you will hear Him say to you the words of verse 34-----"Come, O blessed of My Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."

Closing on a practical note-----to help (in a little way or a big way) with our discretionary parish alms fund to give direct help to those needing help, just contact me---after church, or by phone, or by text or email. God will bless you for helping those in need!