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End Times 1 – Matthew 25:31-46 – Your Shepherd-King Calls for You

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The Last Judgment. Judgment Day. From there he will come to judge the living and the dead. I'm sure you were excited when you heard that as our service theme for today... or maybe not. I know that for a lot of people, Judgment is one of those things that can really be kind of scary to think about. We read a section of Scripture like our Gospel lesson for today, and our sinful hearts drop. We rightly fear a holy judgment because we know we don't stack up. We shudder at Jesus' words of condemnation because we know that's what we deserve. We feel inadequate about any of the good works Jesus listed for us, because we know we haven't done them like we should.

When we think about the Last Judgment, we think about everything that's negative about us. We think about that judge taking us to task for every bad and wrong thing we do all the time, and we worry that just maybe our sentence is going to read, "*Depart from me, you who are cursed.*"

Well make no mistake about it, Jesus is going to say those words to somebody on Judgment Day. But people of God, know that he is *not* going to say them to you. As we look at this section of Scripture, I want you to see your Savior Jesus, your Shepherd-King, not as the one who comes to judge you for your sins, but as the one who comes to bring you home to be with him forever. Don't see here a harsh judge breathing down your neck, but rather one who wants to lead you to the green pastures and still waters he's preparing for you. Don't think he just wants to run you down with "why weren't you better, and why didn't you do more?" No, he's the Good Shepherd who wants to restore your soul. And finally don't worry about him saying, "*Depart from me, you who are cursed,*" but rather look forward to him leading you through the valley of the shadow of death and bringing you to dwell in the house of the LORD forever, because *that's* what he's coming here to do.

See, no matter how fearful Judgment Day might be for unbelievers, it doesn't have to be for you. Jesus wants you to be absolutely sure of that, and so he tells you three important things here that can put all your doubts and fears to rest. When Jesus gathers his sheep together to himself on the Last Day, the first thing he's going to say to you is, "*Come, you who are blessed by my Father.*"

We sometimes get this impression that Judgment Day is going to be like standing naked in a stadium full of people who are screaming at you, while every wrong you've ever committed scrolls across the jumbotron. You feel so totally ashamed and exposed because you know

very well the kind of things you've thought and said and done, and you're terrified that all those things are going to come to light for everyone to see. Christ is going to come in all his glory and all his holy angels with him, and that's just going to make you look and feel that much worse. When you think about Judgment Day, sometimes it almost makes you want to crawl inside a little hole and die.

Sad to say, that's how even a lot of Christians think about it, and I think that's why as the first thing out of his mouth Christ himself is going to call for you, "*Come, you who are blessed by my Father,*" because there's comfort there; there's warm invitation. There's a reminder of who you are through faith in Christ, and so there's the assurance of grace and mercy and blessing. In fact, the blessing that God is going to give us on that day is one that he's been working since virtually the beginning of time. It's the blessing of sins forgiven and freedom from death and the devil and the threat of hell that goes with them. He's going to cover your sinful nakedness with the pure, white robes of his perfect righteousness. And because we have those blessings, that means we also have another great blessing of peace as we look forward to Christ's second coming and the last judgment, because it's that blessed peace and joy that he's going to give to us in fullest measure when he comes in all his glory to bring us his salvation and eternal life.

You have God's greatest blessing of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, which means you have the blessing of life everlasting in heaven. You have nothing to fear when Judgment Day comes, because for you now, that's just the day when you finally get to meet your Savior and your heavenly Father. And don't miss the significance of that fact. It is your Savior, your brother, your friend who is going to be your judge in that day. He who lived a perfect life in your place, died a sacrificial death for your sake, and rose again from the grave on Easter morning to declare you once and for all not guilty of all your sins – he will never forsake you or turn his back on you. He loves you far too much and he went through way too much for you to ever let that happen. He's not going to *judge* you; he's going to *vindicate* you. No, through faith in Jesus Christ, all your sins are wiped away, you are members of God's own family, and God himself is truly your heavenly Father, who loves you and cares about you and is waiting for you with open arms. Our God is gracious and faithful and trustworthy, so will he not follow through on all his promises to you? Absolutely he will, without question. So as you look forward to that day, don't be afraid, because your Shepherd-King calls for you: "*Come, you who are blessed by my Father.*"

But I'll tell you, for a lot of people, their fear about Judgment Day is only getting started when they talk about standing before the Judge. "What if I'm so bad that Jesus just gets fed up with me and loses his patience and throws me into hell with all the rest? God knows I deserve it. Then everyone else will, too." Again, that's true. Left to ourselves, that is what we

deserve. Apart from faith in Christ, that's what we would get. And that is what's going to happen to everyone who follows after the devil in this world – they're going to suffer just the same eternal punishment as him and his evil angels. But notice that that's not something God ever wanted people to have to go through. It was never meant for *us*, it wasn't prepared for *us*, that's what Jesus says here. That may be what we deserve now because of our sins, but that's exactly why our heavenly Father sent Jesus to be our Savior, so that hell isn't our inescapable fate. No, for us now, through faith in Jesus Christ, hell's nowhere in the picture and we don't have to be afraid of it anymore, because heaven is our home. And we can know that because Jesus himself says so: “*Take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.*”

If you're still a little worried that you're not going to measure up on that day, then that's what you need to hear. See, your relationship with God has never been about you and the things you do. It's only and always been about Jesus and what he's perfectly done for you to win salvation for you. Think about this: what's an inheritance? Basically it's a special and undeserved gift that you get from a loved one when they die. Well believe me, there's no one who loves you more than Jesus Christ. In fact, he loved you so much that he laid down his life for you on the cross, to make you children of God and to open for you the gates of his heavenly kingdom. That's the inheritance you have waiting for you one day, and that's the inheritance that he promised he's in heaven preparing for you right now. We are brothers and sisters of Christ, heirs of God's greatest gifts, and one day we're going to be kings reigning right along with the King of kings in heavenly peace and joy, glory and perfection forever.

And so much is that a gift of God's purest grace that he's been preparing that specially for you ever since he chose you to be his child before time began. Your heavenly Father predestined you in love to be his own and to live with him in his kingdom in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, and ever since then he's been preparing you for that and he's been preparing that for you. So know with certainty that when your Shepherd-King comes back on the Last Day, he's not coming to condemn you. He's coming to make good on all of his promises to you. He's coming to fulfill all his plans and purposes for your good that he's been working from the beginning of time. He's coming to call you home, to take “*your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.*”

So then you might just have one lingering anxiety here: “Why does it seem like Jesus is so hung up on the things we do? He doesn't mention faith or forgiveness here at all! How can I know if I've done enough good, or if I've done too much bad? This makes me look more like a goat than a sheep!”

Well my friends, Jesus might not mention faith or forgiveness specifically by name, but they are there. Remember, you're blessed by your heavenly Father. Your Savior invites you to take your inheritance – his eternal, heavenly Kingdom. You only receive those blessings through faith in Jesus Christ; that's the whole story of the rest of the Scriptures. So then notice also that maybe Jesus doesn't specifically mention forgiveness here, but for his sheep, for you, he doesn't mention sin anywhere, either. He mentions only the good works, the fruits of faith you did throughout your life out of love and thanks to Christ for everything he did for you first and especially for the forgiveness he already gave you through faith. That means all your sins have been taken away and God only sees in you now Christ's perfection, not your failures.

See, the whole difference in the things the sheep and the goats do is summed up in those two little words of Christ: whatever you did, you did *for me*. That tells you that while our *actions* might sometimes look the same as unbelievers, our *attitudes* aren't. We believers have a special motivation of faith and love in Jesus Christ that drives everything we do, and that makes all the difference in God's eyes. The fruits of faith that Jesus mentions about us here are just the outward proof that we are believers in Christ. They're not what earn our way to heaven, but rather they're an outward reflection of our inward hope that that's where we're already headed by God's grace. Through faith alone are we God's children and brothers and sisters in Christ. Through faith alone can we please God in our lives of Christian good works. And through faith alone does your Shepherd-King call to you, “*Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.*”

So what's there really to be afraid of about Judgment Day? For God's people, nothing. In fact, it seems like the name is the worst and scariest part of it. But you know really, our Savior doesn't even want us to think about the Last Judgment in those terms. When we think about Jesus coming back again for us, he wants us to lift up our heads and look forward to it with joy and eager anticipation, with longing and hope as the day of our final *redemption*, and the end of all our doubts and fears.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, your sins are fully and forever forgiven for Christ's sake. Your Savior laid down his life for you and suffered hell itself so you'll never have to. Jesus has defeated and destroyed the devil and everything that would accuse and condemn you, so now there's nothing left for you but your God's grace and mercy and the certain promise of your Shepherd-King's call, guaranteed by faith: “*Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.*” Amen.