

God's Promises
April 3, 2016

Scripture:

Reading from the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 25, starting with verse 31. Jesus is speaking:

Matt 25:31 “When the Son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. 32 Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate them from one another, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, 33 and he will place the sheep at his right hand, but the goats at the left. 34 Then the King will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; 35 for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, 36 I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’ 37 Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee, or thirsty and give thee drink? 38 And when did we see thee a stranger and welcome thee, or naked and clothe thee? 39 And when did we see thee sick or in prison and visit thee? 40 And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.’ 41 Then he will say to those on his left hand, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; 42 for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, 43 I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ 44 Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see thee hungry or thirsty, or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to thee?’ 45 Then he will answer them, “Truly, I say to you, as you did it not to the least of these, you did it not to me.”

These are the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, thanks be to God. We pray that God will bless the hearing of his Holy word.

I expect that you are all very familiar with these words of Jesus. They are the last words of Jesus's public ministry as recorded by Matthew. Toward the end of Jesus's last week in Jerusalem, he is asked about the end times, the time when the Messiah will come. Mark and Luke conclude Jesus's public ministry with warnings to be watchful and aware, even though none will know when the end of the age will come. The Gospel of Matthew adds four parables, which illustrate and elaborate on the warning to be both faithful and watchful. These culminate in this vision of the final judgment. So, we must take these as very important words.

Now, I don't know about you, but I have always been troubled by this scripture. I find myself asking, “How do I measure up? Am I among the sheep, or am I among the goats?” It's a hard scripture. I ask myself, “That man begging for a dollar outside the Intermodal Center, that I just walked by and ignored, was he the face of Jesus?” Or, “I just threw away that solicitation letter with the picture of the sad-eyed child on the envelope. Should I have sent them money?”

Tuesday morning I rode my bike in to Wilkes University. I heard a “flappa – flappa – flappa” from the adjacent Wyoming Avenue. Somebody had a tire going flat. He was across

from the Borough Building, with its police and fire departments. And surely he had a cell phone. He wouldn't need my help. It took me about half a block to think to myself, "Here I am, about to talk to the folks at First Presbyterian Church about this scripture, and I'm just riding on and not helping someone in need." So, as a sense of guilt got the better of me, I circled back to see if I could help change a tire or something. The meeting I needed to get to couldn't be all that important. In fact, this would be a good excuse to miss it. Well, when I got back, the car was gone! Apparently the driver had decided to limp off with his flat tire to somewhere else, perhaps a nearby service station, or maybe even all the way home. So, there I was, feeling silly and guilty over having hesitated, having decided to help for all the wrong reasons, and with nothing accomplished, not even an excuse to miss the meeting. I was definitely feeling like one of the goats!

Now, I can't tell you much about sheep from personal experience. But I have had an acquaintance with goats. Or, rather, one particular goat. My grandfather kept a herd of goats as a way to keep the grass and weeds under control in the fields adjacent to his home in rural Virginia. I must have been about three or four years old at the time. My grandfather and father decided they would give me the opportunity to help "train" one of the kids, that is, a young goat. They had a rope tied around the goat's neck as a collar, as my grandfather brought the goat up in front of me. I looked at the goat, and the goat looked at me. My grandfather placed the end of the rope in my hands, then he let go of the goat. That goat may have been smaller than I was, but he knew what he wanted to do. He took off at a run.

I really didn't understand what was going on. I just stood there holding the end of the rope. Suddenly all the slack was gone, and wham! I found myself jerked off my feet and onto the gravel. I let go of the rope. So much for my career as a goat tamer! I've never been especially fond of goats ever since. So, it doesn't bother me at all that Jesus uses goats as the 'unrighteous' in this teaching. But, am I a 'goat'? Am I one of the unrighteous to be condemned at the judgement? Have I missed opportunities to do good to others, and in doing so, condemned myself?

I am confident we all know the answer to that. What was it we said after the prayer of confession? We all said it, in unison. "In Jesus Christ we are forgiven." The errors we make, and our sins, are forgiven by God in Jesus Christ. When we commit our lives to follow Jesus, and seek to follow his way, we are assured of pardon and forgiveness, and a reconciliation to God. So, how do sheep and goats figure into that? If we have made that commitment to God, despite mistakes we may make and even sins, our lives will show our commitment to God in what we do. We will reflect the love that God shares with us through the life, suffering, and death of Jesus. We can live with a joy in the Resurrection, which shows that God, in Jesus, triumphed, and is master over death, then and always. That's what we, as Christians, profess. As the apostle Paul puts it in Romans, 8:38: **"For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."**

The acts of caring that Jesus mentions are not a check-off list. They are a way of life. You don't raise your salvation score each time you do one, and lower it, or maybe have it set

back to zero, each time you miss an opportunity. Indeed, notice that the righteous are surprised. “Lord, when did we see you hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or naked or in prison?” They have just done what love expects, with no thought that this is earning them salvation. Because, it isn’t. It is their faithfulness to God, manifest in their actions, that puts them in the righteous category. They are living generous lives that are a light to the world. In contrast, the unrighteous have lived, let us say, “efficient” lives. They have not wasted their caring on things that didn’t matter. If they had seen Jesus and known it was him, and how important he was, that would have been worth their ministrations. But as it was, they saw no need to waste their attention on things that would yield to them no benefits.

On this second Sunday of Eastertide, as we rejoice in the Resurrection and its meaning for us, I’d like to focus on one particular verse within this scripture reading, verse 34. Jesus says,

“Then the King will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.’”

In our worry about sheep and goats, and whether we might be in the wrong category, we often overlook the treasure of this promise Jesus makes to us on God’s behalf. I know I have. I’m so busy worrying about my missing those opportunities that I forget to go back and look at what the King says first. He welcomes the righteous, the blessed ones, into God’s kingdom. A kingdom prepared for us, a kingdom that has been awaiting us, from the beginning of the world, from the very start of time itself. This, too, is one of our foundational beliefs as Christians. When Jesus is raised from the dead on Easter Sunday, God demonstrates that there is a greater reality, a reality that exists beyond the material understanding that we have of the world.

We normally witness just the ordinary manner in which things happen. The Sun comes up each morning, people go hither and yon in their everyday lives, and the sun goes down for the night. Babies are born, people grow up, live out their lives, and eventually die.

But, something special, out of the ordinary, unique, happened with Jesus that Easter Sunday. A resurrection! Not just a resuscitation to his former self. Jesus is resurrected to a new, heavenly body, and a new way of being, that transcends the appearances and manner of ordinary existence. There were witnesses. The apostle Paul tells us what he received from the other apostles, that the risen Jesus was seen on numerous occasions, including, as he describes it, “to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive,” as Paul writes his letter to the Corinthians. (1 Cor 15:6) When Jesus ascended to heaven, he left the disciples of that day, and us in our day, with the promise that we, like him, would someday join him as Children of God in God’s kingdom to come, a glorious existence beyond the bounds of our mortal, material world. That is the “Kingdom, prepared for us, from the foundation of the world,” that Jesus is talking about in this scripture.

This isn’t the only scripture in which we are given this promise of the kingdom to come. In the Gospel of John Jesus comforts his frightened disciples with a description of a place prepared for them, a place with many rooms in his Father’s house. In the letters of Paul we have a few glimpses of the visions that God had granted him. The Revelation of John contains the

wonderful description of the New Jerusalem, an abode where God will live with men, and a stream flows from God's Throne that will give both water and abundance.

I read from the Revelation of John, Chapter 21, starting with verse 1:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. 2 And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband; 3 and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; 4 He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be any mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away.

What is the Kingdom of God really like in its details? We have no way of knowing. We are limited by the imaginations of our earthly bodies and minds. John wrote from the perspective he had in his day. God gave him a vision that he could understand. There is probably no way we can really understand the reality of God's Kingdom that we will enter, given the limits of our perspective. What we do have is the assurance of God's love and caring for us, illustrated by Jesus's life and ministry, and his acts of healing and life-giving. That kind of caring and love is what awaits us in God's Kingdom. That is what God, in Jesus, has promised.

Now, you may be thinking, "What about the goats?" In this passage, it's bad news for them. Interestingly, they reply with the same words to the King as the righteous do. "When did we see you hungry or thirsty?" But their meaning is different. The righteous are in wonder at God's generosity. They did not know that in helping others they were serving Him. Those on God's left, in those same words, are protesting that it isn't fair; they did not understand what they were expected to do! They had an excuse! If they had known it was the King, they would have acted differently.

There is a note of sadness in this. They have chosen to lead that kind of life. It is not what God intended. They have fallen short of the mark, the definition of sin. It's not just an accident. As Jesus explains elsewhere in the Gospel, God has reached out time and time again, through the prophets and others. The Revelation of John describes how in spite of the terrible things happening in the end times, men will continue to sin and won't repent.

Some of you may remember my mother, Ruth Gilmer, who came and spoke here maybe 20 years ago about the Presbyterian Congo mission. She put the issue this way, "We are meant to be with God. God made heaven for us, his creation. Hell was created for the devil." My mother's sister of beloved memory, said, "All God wants is for us to love him."

Jesus said, in lament over Jerusalem, just a day or two before our scripture passage, "**O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together, as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!**" (Matt 23: 37) That is how we as Christians understand our relationship to God; he is constantly seeking us, trying to help us, through Jesus Christ, find the way to His kingdom.

Now, yes, I know that there are those that deny that there is a reality beyond that which we can survey with our own senses. Some of the leaders of our secular culture cannot see past the material world that bounds ordinary existence. It takes Faith to set aside the material view and focus on God's promises of a greater reality, a reality that has a future, a reality that has promise.

How can we dispute with that material view? We really can't. We cannot prove God's existence to those who choose not to believe. This isn't new. Throughout history, there are those who have been "scoffers", who reject either the existence or relevance of God or any gods. We read about them in the psalms. Those seeking to find reason to reject a higher authority will always find justification for doing so. Only God can reach them, if they let him. We can only pray for that to happen, and pray that perhaps God can use us, as we live lives of faithfulness and joy, as instruments to accomplish His will.

But, those who choose Faith will be rewarded, not only at the end, but by God's grace and favor, as they live their lives as blessings to others here on earth. Jesus promised that we would receive the Holy Spirit, a Comforter, who would be present with us. That Spirit will be with us, even in our times of trouble.

I was with my mother as she lay dying in the University of Virginia Hospital in Charlottesville, Virginia, now 5 years ago. She was propped up in bed. She was unable to talk; all we could share was presence in holding her hand. Her eyes were closed. Suddenly, my mother's eyes opened and looked up, toward the ceiling, and a brief but beautiful smile appeared. The words of Psalm 121, which we just read earlier, immediately came to my mind. "I will lift up mine eyes unto to the hills, from whence cometh my help. My help cometh from the Lord, which made heaven and earth." I firmly believe that my mother saw the Lord coming for her with his angels, saying to her something like, "Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you, from the foundation of the world." And, in that moment, not only did I witness God's faithfulness to my mother, but I received a sign of his presence to me, and to all of His children.

And, so, Jesus seeks ultimately to say those words to all of us, his saints, his vessels of blessing to the rest of the world. Rejoice! For he is risen! And, in him, so shall we be blessed in life and in death as Children of God! Such are the promises of God. Promises about which we can sing for joy!

Amen.