

CCUA SS Initiative  
February 22, 2026

## Jesus and the Judgment Matthew 25:31-46

### *Introduction:*

Today's lesson is taken from the last part of the Olivet Discourse. This is the last of Jesus' broad teaching times according to Matthew's organization of this gospel. We're still in what Matthew includes as the answer to the disciples' question about signs of the destruction of the temple and the return of Jesus. This teaching goes beyond the limits of the question and presents a word picture of the judgment of the nations by Jesus as king that is included in the events of his return. This one is neither a parable nor an allegory. It is a word picture. Throughout history it has been interpreted as though it were an allegory, but when that happens, each interpretation reflects more the thoughts, fears, and/or confidences of the interpreter rather than necessarily adhering to the teaching of Jesus himself. As we look at it, we have to remember that the idea of "sheep" and "goats" as two categories of living creatures is not a parable, but simply a simile.

The author of this lesson is Richard Thompson, who was first a student of George Lyons here at Olivet. For the last two decades they were both colleagues on faculty at Northwest Nazarene University. Dick Thompson retired just last year, and he and his wife have since moved back here to Bourbonnais and attend College Church from time to time.

Without further introduction, let's get to the lesson. We'll look at the first three verses only to start, and I want to go as soon as possible into the discussion questions.

### *I. The "sheep" and the "goats." Matthew 25:31-33*

There are three elements in the word picture so far: the Son of Man sitting on his throne in judgment; the nations gathered; and the individual people (not the nations *per se*) divided into two groups. The word picture of dividing sheep from goats would have been a familiar one to both the disciples and to later audiences who might have had at least some agricultural background. As Dick Thompson tells us in the lesson, even though the two can share the same pasture all day, they have different needs at night.

#### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. How does this picture of the Son of Man on his throne here shape your understanding of at least some part of the judgment? Where does it take place; what's the outcome?
2. What does "all the nations will be gathered" say to you?
3. What image does being placed "on the right" or "on the left" say to you from the outset?

(Comments on “right and left” from third world experiences, from Latin languages, and from the French Revolution.)

As we move to the next reading, I want us to be aware that the next two sections of this episode—vv. 34-40 and vv. 41-45—are written with a precisely created literary parallel structure. That should be obvious, but it needs to be noted from the outset.

### *II. Judgment for those on the right. Matthew 25:35-40*

The words that will be in full antithetical parallel are striking: “come,” “blessed,” “the kingdom prepared for you,” and “you gave me. . . .” We’ll show the contrast when we look at the other set of verses.

There are two things I want us to look at. First, is the response of the people on the right. It is written in words that sound like defendants denying the accusations. The accusation, “You did this, and this, and this, and this,” etc. They answer, in effect, “No, we didn’t. When did we do that?” Have you ever been accused of doing something right without knowing you did it? The second thing I would point out here is that the judgment and the outcome are based solely on performance or lack thereof.

#### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. How much of this appears to you to be more reflective of the Old Testament than the New Testament?
2. Reflection: Is it possible to engage in one or more of the activities listed here and not be doing it to Jesus?
3. The opposite question: How is it possible to be doing these things and not know we’re doing it to Jesus?
4. What difference would it make if we knew we were doing it to Jesus?
5. What does the expression “since the creation of the world” add to the understanding of this judgment, and to the persons for whom it was prepared?

### *III. Judgment for those on the left. Matthew 25:41-45*

Let’s look at the contrasting vocabulary between the two statements—

<u>on the right</u>	<u>on the left</u>
come	depart
blessed by my father	cursed
the kingdom prepared	eternal fire prepared
for you	for the devil and his angels
when did we see you . . . and give you . . .	when did we see you . . . and not help you

For me, a major difficulty with this whole word picture is the fact that both groups of people address the Son of Man on the throne as 'Lord,' when, in fact, it is a judgment of all the nations. Interpreters of this text are all over the place when trying to deal with what appears to be an incongruous situation. Does the word "nations" here really mean all the nations of the world? If so, how is it that everyone would recognize this person as Lord? What does 'Lord' mean if they address him as such? Some commentators want to say that Jesus is talking only about the judgment of the church. Some Christians are sheep and others are goats. But that becomes problematic, especially if the word "Christian" doesn't mean anything more than "someone who goes to church," or "someone who recognizes some form of Christian heritage in their background."

**QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:**

1. Compared to other passages in the New Testament that speak about the final judgment, what's missing here?
2. How do you respond to the word "righteous" being used as a description for those persons on the right of the Son of Man?
3. What does it say to you that the eternal fire is prepared for the devil and his angels and not for humans?
4. Do you think the wording of the defense of this group includes the idea that if they had known it were Jesus, they would have responded appropriately?

*Conclusion:*

For a conclusion I want to combine several sources into a composite idea. One of my sources reminds us that Jesus appears to be answering the disciples' questions in terms of being prepared for his return. The parable of the 10 virgins appears to call for such preparation as a question of consistent spiritual life in Christ. Today's word picture takes the next step in being prepared for the judgment. Dick Thompson opens today's lesson in our quarterlies with what I'm choosing as our conclusion. "Jesus' message is simply this; these 'kingdom people' are those who **embody the heart** of the kingdom of heaven, not those who most loudly affirm themselves as God's people" (p. 49, emphasis added). In other words, just claiming to be a Christian means very little, if anything at all, without living out kingdom values from the heart and not as a means of seeking a reward.