

20th Street Baptist Church

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Loving the Least of These and Its Implications in Our Understanding of Eschatology

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I want to take this time to first thank the members of 20th Street Baptist for allowing me the privilege to come and speak with you today about our work as an organization in the City of Conway. I consider it a great honor and responsibility to visit with the people of God, exhorting and encouraging them to be not only shining light to those within the church but also to those who remain in the darkness and despair of a life without God.

Therefore, my next few moments here are precious. The words that I want to convey to you today are not meant simply to stir you to action in your community and support the work of CoHO in Conway. These words hopefully will be the jumpstart to the battery of your heart and will cause an ignition with the body of 20th Street Baptist that will propel you forward to enjoy in the God who dwells with you and has saved you to accomplish good works.

I want to use Matthew 25:31-46 as the outline for our discussion this morning. The Gospel of Matthew is the first Gospel in our New Testament. While it was not the first gospel written in our collection of four Gospels, it nonetheless is the record of the ministry of Jesus Christ according to Matthew. Our writer was a former tax collector in the Jewish nation. Matthew, a Jew, was a contract worker for the empire of Rome. He collected more than what was required in taxes, becoming a wealthy man but simultaneously he was viewed as the “other.” His own Jewish people viewed him as a traitor, one of the lowest of society. You can see the disdain that others had for people like him as he was included in a list of undesirables; “tax collectors and sinners.” Yet Jesus Christ chooses Matthew as he is working his profession. His action in choosing a tax collector and eating with a tax collector and these “others,” only confirmed what he told the religious leaders of his day, “Go and learn what this means, “I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.” For I came not to call the righteous but sinners” (Mt 9:13).

If you survey the landscape of Christianity in America regarding eschatology or last things, it can easily be compared to standing in front of your local Redbox at Walmart. You lift up the red screen cover, place your index finger on the screen and begin to scroll through the numerous options.

The options for “purchase” are overwhelming. There are differing millennial views: Pre-Millennial, Post-Millennial and A-millennial. There is the futurist view which includes dispensationalism and covenant having all of what we read in Revelation and Matthew 24/25 as some time ahead of us; in contrast to the preterist view which has those same events already concluded. Then of course we have even smaller categories to choose from involving the timing of the rapture, the identity of the anti-Christ and “is my social security number just the prequel to the mark of the beast?”

Brothers and sisters, while all of these options have their place in the “redbox of eschatology,” and should be discussed; what we have missed to our detriment and the detriment of the world are the words of Christ that lead us out of the trailer of the present age and into the new heavens and earth which is the grand motion picture.

What leads us to the words of Christ in Matthew 25:31-46? Well, Jesus has come triumphantly into Jerusalem and hailed as the coming king on a donkey (Mt 21). The people cry out, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!” Fast forward now to Matthew 24 as Jesus in his role as prophet speaks seven woes upon the religious leaders of Israel to include Jerusalem itself. The religious leader or the people that knew the Scriptures better than most were accused of “tying up heavy burdens, hard to bear and lay them on peoples shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger”(Mt 23:4). Jesus calls them hypocrites! “For you tithe mint and dill and cumin and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice, mercy and faithfulness” (Mt 23:23).

We move from Jesus speaking to the religious leaders, to him answering the questions of his disciples concerning the temple of God. The close of the Jewish age was to be signaled by the destruction of the temple. Jesus’ Olivet discourse is centered on the overthrow of this great symbol of God’s presence and usher in a new and eternal age where righteousness would dwell forever. Finally, Jesus provides two pictures and one judgment concerning the kingdom of Heaven. “The kingdom of Heaven will be like... (Mt 25:1) and “it will be like a man on a journey” (Mt 25:14).

We are moving through a drama that has three acts: Act 1 is the religious system has become so corrupt that Jesus as prophet declares the whole system is desolate (Mt 23:38); Act 2 is Jesus declaring to his disciples that the end of the age is tied directly with this temple (Mt 24) and Act 3 is Jesus informing his listeners that they must take care not only to be watchful concerning when he comes but also steward well what has been given to them by him.

I want to specifically address to you today the words of Christ and what I consider great importance regarding our responsibility to love the least of these and its implications in our understanding of eschatology. I want us to answer three questions. 1) What will that day be like when we stand before Christ? 2) What opportunity are we given to interact with Christ now? 3) What will be the result of our interactions?

What will that day be like when we stand before Christ? (Mt 25:31-34; 41)

Jesus in his speaking and teaching drew heavily from the Old Testament. Here in our text, Jesus appeals to the prophets Daniel and Ezekiel. “When the Son of Man comes in his glory...” This term “son of man” is taken from Daniel and we can immediately go to Daniel 7 where the prophet said, “I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days”(Dn 7:13). What will that day look like for you and me? It will look like a day in which we see Jesus, the crucified and risen Christ, seated on his “glorious throne” and all creation is gathered around their awesome Creator. It will be a day of great rejoicing, singing and bowing. On that day you will join with a multitude singing, “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain...and ransomed people for God.”

So on that day, not only do we see Jesus, the Son of Man seated on his throne, but also all peoples will be gathered before him. "Before him will be gathered all the nations..." These are not political nations based on how governments divide up territories. These are ethnic groups of the human race. Every ethnicity from every location will be brought together at the throne of their creator and it will be a glorious day. Yet this imagery of the gathering of divided ethnicities then transitions into a division of these same people.

A careful shepherd knows his sheep. He looks among the multitude of creatures and he recognizes those for whom he would freely and joyfully give his life for. He is that shepherd that leaves his gathered 99, to secure his lost 1. Notice in our text it is not the angels who do the separating but it is the Son of Man who separates "people from one another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats." I need to ask, "Do you have the certainty, the assurance, that Christ will lead you to his right hand?" The Good Shepherd has laid down his life for his sheep and when the Gospel call goes forth, those that are his sheep will hear his voice and believe. They will not follow the voice of false prophets and those that claim they have some new knowledge which only leads to death. If you hear his voice, I urge you to believe. Follow after this shepherd who says, "I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land. And I will feed them on the mountains of Israel...I will feed them with good pasture. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down... I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. And I, the LORD, will be their God..." (Ez 34:13-14, 15, 24).

This will be a glorious day for you. You will behold your God, Savior and King in all his glory. You will be gathered with the saints who had longed to see the coming of their salvation and with new ears you will hear, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." But for you that are goats. Those of you today that are unbelieving; it will most certainly be the day of justice. It will be a day of clouds and darkness. You will sadly not hear the gracious words of Christ's blessings but according to Christ himself he will say, "Depart from me, you cursed, into eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels."

What opportunity are we given to interact with Christ now? (Mt 25:35-36,42-43)

The blessing and curse that is pronounced by Jesus is based on two indisputable facts. The first based clearly on what Jesus said to Nicodemus in John 3, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God" (Jn 3:3). The sheep are those who have been born again by the Spirit of God. They have been made alive and received the gift of faith; all from God. The goats are those who remain in darkness and "do not obey the Son" and "the wrath of God remain on him" (Jn 3:36).

The second indisputable fact is what we find here in our text. We are given opportunities on a daily basis to interact with the risen Christ, touching him not only in our gathering as saints, but also among the least of these. The indisputable fact is that sheep not only are born again to enjoy and see God but they will also be caring for the least of our society.

Jesus moves to mention that these sheep are welcomed into the kingdom because they have met the hungry, thirsty, imprisoned, stranger and naked. While this is certainly not an exhaustive list, the second reason the sheep are granted blessing is because they cared for the least of their society. Look at this list for a moment. In verses 35-39 we need to see that this was not far off ministry in which money was sent alone. This involved the sheep being in a very close proximity to those in suffering. I believe that what we see here is men and women are so transformed by the Gospel their response was to walk in the likeness of their Savior. These sheep went forward “proclaiming good news to the poor, recovering of sight to the blind, setting at liberty those who are oppressed” (Lk 4).

What we can gather from this text which is directly related to eschatology is that right now we are presented with lives in which Christ is calling us to touch. We are being called with a powerful and eternal calling to enter into the suffering of others and in doing so we not only find new friends but Jesus himself.

Are there not in Batesville the hungry and thirsty? Are there not in Batesville the homeless and immigrant; the incarcerated, and the naked? Have you seen, spoken and/or touched the least of these in the county of Independence?

Here are the opportunities given to 20th Street Baptist to interact with Christ in Independence County. In your county 19.3% live at or below the poverty line. In Batesville there are two organizations that deal directly with homelessness and there is one organization that deals with food assistance, “Cedar Ridge Food Pantry” located in Oil Trough and Batesville. What other opportunities are available to you? Visit your county Sheriff and ask are they in need of bible studies. What elderly homes are in this county that have men and women who are sick and in need of prayer? I assure you that the poor are among us and Christ is calling us to them. We that are his sheep will hear his voice calling from among them and if we would only go, we would discover the risen Christ.

What will be the result of our interactions? (Mt 25:37-40; 44-46)

I would like to conclude simply how I began. Eschatology is bigger than debates and assumptions about what will or has happened. We have before us a clear description that when we stand before the risen Christ, it will not be the length of our creeds, what local church we attended or how we voted on Election Day. We clearly see that Christ is not looking for who had the best understanding of his return and the interpretation of Revelation.

Dear family, Christ has put before his church, his flock of blood bought sheep the second great aim of the commandments; to love thy neighbor as thyself. The woes that were pronounced on the religious leaders and the destruction of the temple were the primarily the result of the Israelites rejecting God’s great offering; Jesus Christ. But secondly, the woes that were pronounced on the religious leaders and the destruction of the temple were due because those who had the light and the resources to care for the least of these, chose not to.

Therefore I encourage those of you who are the sheep of God, pursue Christ among the poor. Hear your shepherd’s voice cry out from among them and go with great love and compassion. Your reward is

already secure. He has already said, "Inherit the kingdom *prepared* for you from the foundation of the world." And for you that are the goats. You will not enter God's kingdom by way of doing good works. You will not avoid being sent "away into eternal punishment," by feeding the hungry, providing clothing, visiting the sick or welcoming the stranger. You must be born again. And when you are born again, you will pursue the least of these and at the end, you will be among the righteous that enter into eternal life.