THE KING AND THE LEAST

Matthew 25:31-46

Key Verse: 40

“The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.”

Thank God for our Lord Jesus’ continuous warning that his people should be ready for the powerful and glorious coming of the Son of Man. The Lord wants us to truly believe his prophetic words about his second coming saying, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away. He speaks to us, “So you also must be ready.” And in chapter 25, Jesus told the parable of the ten virgins and the parable of the talents. In the parable of the ten virgins, the coming of the Lord Jesus is compared to the coming of a bridegroom. It really draws in our attention. In the coming of the bridegroom, how great the virgins’ expectation must have been! The five wise virgins went in with the bridegroom to the wedding banquet, but the five foolish virgins were left out of the wedding banquet. The difference between the two groups was whether they had oil in their jars or not. We know that oil keeps a lamp burning. In our Christian life, faith, love and hope should continue. If they discontinue, our spiritual life dies out. Especially when we consider the relationship between the bridegroom and the bride, it is unthinkable for love to be extinguished. Our love for our bridegroom must continue and ever growing as his coming draws nearer and nearer, while the love of most grows cold. May we be like Mary who poured her perfume on Jesus and chose to listen to him sitting at the Lord’s feet putting aside all other things as the secondary. Through the parable of the talents we learned that we are to clearly know what certain things God has entrusted to us and put them to work, never burying them in the ground. We should know the spiritual mathematics, “Everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him.” And our Lord Jesus wants us to be faithful with a few things out of loyalty to our humble, loving, and wonderful Master who is coming. At the same time we should fight against any kind of wicked thinking and laziness at each moment.

Today’s passage is about Jesus’ coming as King uniquely written in Matthew’s gospel. We know that Matthew presents Christ as King, while Mark, as a servant, Luke, a shepherd, and John, as God. It is proper that this story is recorded in Matthew’s account. Jesus comes surely to rule in his kingdom on earth. Yet, before reigning he is to judge all peoples of all nations. It can be Jesus’ last additional warning for us to prepare for his coming. We believe that more warning means more love. May we deeply accept him as our King, and King of all, learning further how to prepare ourselves for the coming of the King, the regal King.

Verse 31 says, “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory.” This is a very meaningful description. It is a wonder of wonders that the Son of God became the Son of Man. His coming on the clouds is not a wonder but a natural thing from God’s viewpoint. While on earth Jesus, liked to call himself the Son of Man though he is the Son of God. Hiding his glory in humility, he lived a shepherd life and finally died on the cross to save his people from their sins. He rose again from the dead and ascended to heaven. Here in his sermon on the Mount of Olives, he gave his disciples the words of prophecy before his crucifixion that he would come back in power and great glory riding on the clouds of the sky. He will come as King and so he will sit on his throne. Up to this point Jesus does not call himself the King. In today’s passage, both the title “the Son of Man” (1) and the title “King” (34, 40) are used. The titles together can be the complete revelation of Jesus. He affirms that He is both Son of Man and King.

Jesus’s coming as King will be the fulfillment of all the prophecies of the Old Testament and the New Testament. Especially Isaiah 9:7 says, “Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.” What a fulfillment! We know that the glorious kingdom of David had come and gone. King David reigned on his throne in Jerusalem, Zion, the city of David. At the peak of David’s kingdom it is written in 2 Samuel 8:15, “David reigned over all Israel, doing what was just and right for all his people.” Jesus will reign on David’s throne in the same place. The angel Gabriel also said to Mary concerning the baby Jesus in her womb in Luke 1:32-33, “He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his Father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.” Jesus said to his disciples in Matthew 19:28, “I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.” It is also clearly written in Zechariah 14:4, “On that day his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives…” and in 14:9, “The LORD will be king over the whole earth…” Truly the words of God in the Bible are true. The expressions are concrete and realistic. As his first coming was real and true, so will his second coming be. His first coming was humble, truly humble as our good shepherd and Saviour, but his second coming will be glorious in heavenly glory as our Lord and King, King over the whole earth.

It is also notable that he comes with all the angels. It is also written in Jude 14, “…See, the Lord is coming with thousands upon thousands of his holy ones/saints to judge/execute judgment on everyone…” We know that the King is the Judge. Before reigning as King, he has to judge all the people of all nations to decide who will enter his kingdom. For his kingdom will be the kingdom of righteousness and justice, and peace and love. So verse 2 says, “All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.” When one dies, that moment is the time of judgment as Hebrews 9:27 says, “Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment.” We know that when Jesus comes, he will fight in the battle of Armageddon, a very specific place in the land of Israel. In that battle. the final Antichrist and all his followers will be captured and killed. However, at that time, there will be many people still alive on the earth, even after going through the time of the Great Tribulation. There will be those who have kept their faith after repentance and those who still have remained unrepentant, unbelieving and ungodly. Jesus will not rule over all of them. The time of repentance will be no more, but only the time of judgment, awaiting to sort out the people.

It is interesting to pay attention to what Zechariah says in 14:4: “On that day his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem, and the Mount of Olives will be split in two from east to west, forming a great valley, with half of the mountain moving north and half moving south.” What is this great massive valley formed for? We can listen to the prophecy of Joel 3:13, “Swing the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Come, trample the grapes, for the winepress is full and the vats overflow—so great is their wickedness!” Here, harvest speaks of judgment. This is the time for the nations to be judged. The prophet continues in 3:14, “Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision! For the day of the LORD is near in the valley of decision.” It is not a valley where men make a decision, but a valley where God makes a decision. It is not man’s day but the Lord’s day to decide who will go into the millennial kingdom of Christ, to separate the people one from another.

The separation is painful, but is inevitable, for the righteous and the evil cannot coexist, or the good and the bad. Jesus the Judge will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. In the field of the world, the weeds and the wheat grow together until the time of harvest. Then Jesus said in Matthew 13:40-41, “As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil.” Jesus also said that when all kinds of fish were caught in a net, “the fishermen pulled it up on the shore, and they sat down and collected the good fish in basket, but threw the bad away. This is how it will be at the end of the age” (13:48-49).

Here what is written? Verse 34 says, “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.” What an amazing blessing! First of all, it is by God’s grace, sovereign grace chosen by God the Father. This is a profound teaching of the Bible. The idea of God’s choice, the elect, flows throughout the Bible. Paul said in Ephesians 1:4, “He chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.” Revelation 17:8 says, “…The inhabitants of the earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the creation of the world will be astonished when they see the beast.” At the time of Elijah he thought that he was the only one who remained on the side of God, not yielding to Baal, but God reserved for himself seven thousand, who had not bowed the knee to Baal. At this, Paul wrote in Romans 11:5, “So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace.” And Paul said in 1 Corinthians 1:26-29, “Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him.”

Then what is the King’s verdict for those on his right, “For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.” Six things are mentioned: Hunger, thirst, estrangement, improper clothing, sickness, and imprisonment. The point is that they have met the needs of the people, living up to their faith in Christ Jesus. Here the faith and the lives of the righteous were not disconnected. The life of faith and the life of love are to go together. Paul says in Galatians 5:6, “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.” Also, in Ephesians 5:1-2, “Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” And in Titus 2:14, “who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good” (3:8; 14). And John says in 1 John 3:18, “Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.”

Then what did those on his right say in response to the king’s verdict? They were called “the righteous”. It is not by their own righteousness. It is also not just declared righteousness, but imputed righteousness. They are made righteous in Christ. Good deeds come out of the righteous. They were surprised at these words of the King and replied, “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?” The righteous were truly humble. Jesus said in Matthew 18:3-4, “I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” The characteristic of the children is that they are humble and trusting. At this the King will reply, “I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.” Wow! Our King Jesus accepts all our service done in his name. He said in Matthew 10:42, “If anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward.” Surely the least are the ones who need the most help. Truly our life on earth is to be the life of service in the name of our Lord Christ Jesus, not living a selfish life but learning more and more a sacrificial life of serving being transformed in Christ-like character.

They say that once, St. Francis of Assisi met a leper, loathsome and repulsive in the ugliness of his leprosy. St. Francis dismounted and flung his arms around this wretched man. A few seconds later he found that the face of the leper in his arms changed to the face of Christ. We see how much St. Francis loved God.

There was once a child abandoned in a hospital. The parents and doctors gave up hope of reviving the child. The pitiful child’s breath was maintained by an oxygen supplier. One day, a retired nurse saw this dying child while doing her voluntary service. It was a dramatic life-sustaining encounter for the child. The aged nurse resisted the hospital authorities that showed such a cold attitude to the helpless child, and raised her voice, saying, “This child will surely be revived and become a wonderful citizen of our nation to serve others.” Since that day, the nurse devoted herself 24 hours a day to take care of this severely sick young patient. The elderly nurse bathed the child and spoke to her in love although there was no response to her conversing. She sang hymn songs and read the Bible to the child and prayed, taking hold of her hand. However, nothing seemed to happen to improve the condition of the child. But after six months while the nurse was falling asleep having the child in her bosom, she could hear the sound of the melody of the hymn songs she had sung to the child. When she awoke, the sound of the tune was none other than that of the child imitating her singing. It was a signal of the revival of the child. The child patient was Anne Sullivan (1866-1936) who became the teacher of Helen Keller (1880-1968). Without the devoted care of the aged nurse there would have been no Sullivan and no Helen Keller. What a love of God practiced!

We also remember how Apostle Paul served a ran-away slave Onesimus. Paul said that Onesimus had become his son, his very heart, while he was in chains in Rome. In Paul’s care, the formerly useless man became a person useful to all. Paul’s appeal for Onesimus to his master became a book of the Bible. We see how much Paul loved God through serving Onesimus. We see the love of God in Paul’s outpouring his heart on Onesimus. We serve campus students because we know their need of spiritual help, for otherwise their life destiny will be terrible in this world and beyond it, despite their youth and human hope. May we learn to do things for one of the least of Jesus’ brothers, that is to serve one least soul solely in his name.

Now look at verse 41. “Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.” The most dreadful words are the words, “Depart from me” or “I don’t’ know you” from the Lord. That is being separated eternally from the Lord. That is the greatest curse, being plunged into the eternal hell fire. We clearly see that the eternal fire of hell is originally designed for the devil and his angels. John the Baptist said in Matthew 3:12, “His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” And Jesus said in Matthew 13:42, “They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” and in 13:49, “This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” Jesus also described hell this way in Mark 9:48, “where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched” quoted from Isaiah 66:24, “And they will go out and look upon the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me; their worm will not die, nor will their fire be quenched…” In Luke 16, according to Jesus, a rich man who lived a selfish and luxurious life in this world went to hell, while a poor Lazarus went to Abraham’s side in heaven. The rich man said, “Father, Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire” (16:24). In Revelation, it is described as the lake of fire or the fiery lake of burning sulfur.” (19:20; 20:10, 15; 21:8). This is a real place.

What is the verdict for those on his left? The King says in verse 42, “For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’” Here we are to know that Jesus did not just point out their outward acts or philanthropic deeds that were not done in their lives. No. It is the result of the life of self-seeking, rejecting God. Paul said in Romans 2:6-9, “God ‘will give to each person according to what he has done.’ To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honour and immorality, he will give eternal life. But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger. There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jews, then for the Gentiles…” God judges according to our inner hidden motives, which will be displayed in their visible lives. There seem to be many Christians who say, “I am a believer and am saved,” but they live a self-seeking life. That’s self-deception, which we should watch out for.

Look at verse 44, “They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty, or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’” They were self-righteous and still proud. Then in verse 45, “He will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’” May we take Jesus’ warning and examine ourselves whether we are in the faith as Paul said in 2 Corinthians 12:5. God have mercy on us to be able see Jesus in each of his redeemed people, and serve one soul after another and serve the least, that is, the one in the most need of my help in the name of Christ Jesus.

Verse 46 says, “Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.” What a glory it will be to enter the righteous kingdom of Christ! We are reminded of Daniel 12:3, “Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever.” Jesus said in Matthew 13:43, “Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.”

Thank God for our Lord Jesus coming as King and Judge to establish his kingdom of righteousness and love. In view of this coming of the Lord, may we accept him as our King and truly serve him living a life of service, particularly caring for the least in his name.

May we prepare ourselves for the coming of the Son of Man, our King in the great expectation of his kingdom, the kingdom of righteousness and peace and love through serving the least in the love of God in the name of our King Jesus.