

## 1 Second Last Sunday – Matthew 25

Judgment day will be a huge day. Like a thief in the night who comes when no one expects, Christ will return with all his angels to judge the living and the dead. All that was hidden will be uncovered. Everything that was in the dark will be brought into the light. Christ's judgment will be a greater sight than any of the most impressive shows and spectacles of this world. Fire will come and burn up the earth and all its works. Even the most impressive accomplishments will be shown to be nothing but stubble and twigs that quickly disappear in the furnace. Instead, it will be the small things that will be exalted. Those acts of love and compassion noticed by hardly anyone, done to the least important people, will be shown to be the greatest works of God. Christ will reveal them for what they are.

The judgment will simply reveal who had faith and who didn't. But how will Christ reveal this? He will do so by revealing our love. Hearing this should, of course, drive you to a deeper desire to love your neighbor. But such love is not a spectacle to this world. It also doesn't come from a frantic attempt to prove how worthy you are for God's kingdom. No, the love that Jesus will uncover on the last day is the same love that freely flows out of our faith in him. And for this reason, it's a love that is hardly noticed by this noisy and boastful world. In fact, it's often hard to feel in yourself, because your sinful flesh continues to cling to you. But Jesus will reveal it. He will amplify it. He will prove that your works were carried out in God, prepared by him for you to walk in, no matter how small or insignificant they seemed. By bringing this to light, he will prove for all to see that your faith was firmly resting in him. In the meantime, God gives you crosses to bear in this life, which exercise your love toward your neighbor and your faith in Christ.

Consider what your faith is in. Your faith rests in Christ. Who is Christ? He is God's beloved Son. He is the Lord in the flesh. He was given up into death for your sins. He was raised to declare you righteous. As he was deprived of nourishing food and water, hanging as a condemned innocent man on a cross, he hungered and thirsted for the salvation even of his enemies. As he was stripped naked with his clothes divided among pagan soldiers, he sought to clothe unworthy sinners with his own righteousness and mercy. He was a stranger to this world, yet he willingly died to save all who had been estranged from God. He bore all of our sicknesses and sins in his own body. He willingly allowed himself to be kept in bondage, all so he would heal us and set us free from condemnation. This is what your faith rests in. All your hope for the bright future of the world to come hinges on this same despised, neglected, and crucified Christ.

Your faith rests in what is strange, despised, and easily forgotten by a world that celebrates its own accomplishments. It's strange to this world that your faith would be placed in God giving up his only begotten Son into death and raising him from the dead. It's contrary to our own reason that Christ would save us through the washing of water with his Word and that he would still come to us in his body and blood. The desires of our own flesh rebel at the thought that we would not seek vengeance for ourselves but leave all of our troubles to God's judgment. It seems foolish and even self-defeating that you would turn the other cheek when someone slaps you, forgive what people owe you, and walk the extra mile with those who oppose you. And yet, Christ's judgment will reveal that these are God's works, and they are greater than the most celebrated achievements of this world.

## 2 Second Last Sunday – Matthew 25

Jesus says that what you do or don't do to one of the least of his brothers you have done to him. It's similar to when he says that he who is faithful in a little is also faithful in much, and he who is unfaithful in a little is also unfaithful in much. So don't despise the little things. When you gather with your fellow Christians around Christ's Word and sacraments, it may not seem like a mountaintop experience. You may not feel the great rays of glory shining down on you. But when you simply believe what your Lord tells you in this ordinary service of his Word, then you can be certain that you will hear his voice on that last day. When you trust his words, which say, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world," or "This is my body . . . this is my blood shed for you for the forgiveness of sins," or "God works all things out for the good of those who love him and are called according to his purpose," then you can be confident that you will hear him say, "Come, you whom my Father blessed. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you before the world began."

Those who believe what now seems so easily despised and ignored will certainly recognize the Shepherd's voice when he comes in all his glory. Those who trust in the Lord who was hungry, thirsty, estranged, naked, sick, and imprisoned, will certainly know him when he appears with all his angels in his kingdom.

So it is with those whom God has given you to love. Jesus loves them. He remembers how they are treated as much as he remembers how his words are believed. He calls them the least of his brothers. Some of them are with you in this place right now. A brief visit in the narthex may seem like a small and forgettable event, but any tiny expression of love reflecting even the smallest mustard seed of faith is precious in the eyes of the Lord. And he works through it. Some of the least of these brothers of Christ might not yet be his brethren. Perhaps they are currently lost in the darkness of unbelief and despair. But he will call those whom he has chosen. In the meantime, a friendly conversation or a kind invitation to church is much more precious in the sight of God than all the attention this world can give.

Your call in this life is not to end hunger and poverty, get rid of disease, or free all those who are unjustly imprisoned. Instead, God calls you to love even as he calls you to trust his promise in Christ. He who shares a cup of cold water with a disciple because he is Christ's disciple does so because he trusts in the same words of eternal life. A Christian who is languishing in the hospital, the nursing home, or in prison is comforted by the same gospel that comforts you. He is fed and nurtured and clothed by the same righteousness that feeds, nurtures, and covers you. He is loved by the same Savior who loves you. He believes the same words that give you faith and confidence in your salvation.

And Christ will expose this. He will make it abundantly clear who believed this and who didn't. Those who don't believe his words may still imagine that they are serving Christ. Perhaps they are giving people mountain top experiences, thinking that they are growing Christ's kingdom, establishing his reign on earth with all their great achievements. But Jesus' kingdom is not of this world. It doesn't come from big and impressive productions of men. No, his kingdom comes through his simple words and his patient instruction. It comes when our heavenly Father gives us his Holy Spirit so

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that, by his grace, we believe his holy Word and lead godly lives here in time and there in eternity.

Those who see his words and teaching as impractical, boring, or irrelevant will move on to follow more exciting things. They imagine that they are helping more people by focusing on their own works of service. But they only end up losing sight of the simple words of the gospel. They therefore also lose sight of those who need to hear this saving gospel, and, while they rely on their own achievements, they only prepare themselves for eternal condemnation in hell.

God prepared hell because he doesn't want us to go there. He wants us to go to heaven with him. He wants to strengthen our faith in his Son, our hope for his kingdom, and our love for our fellow Christians. He therefore prepared hell for the devil and his angels, because they constantly distract us from the gospel, weaken our faith, and make us grow cold in our love toward one another. Of course, it's a terrifying thought that you would ever be condemned with them. But don't despair. Hold onto the simple words of your Savior. He promises to give you his kingdom. He promises to save you from condemnation. He willingly bore all hunger, thirst, estrangement, nakedness, sickness, and bondage precisely to secure for you forgiveness of sins, eternal life, and salvation. He gives you everything you need both for this life and for the life to come. So if you are sharing this inheritance with only a tiny congregation of saints, you are sharing it with Christ himself. He is sharing it with you. And he promises that no one will take it away from you.

His final judgment day will make clear that everything Jesus did and said for you was true. It will prove that every cross you have born, every injury you have suffered, every cheek you have turned, and every mile you have walked will not be in vain. He will compensate you a hundredfold for everything you have lost. He will prove that he has indeed worked all things out for those who love him.

Our love is not perfected in this life, because our faith is still weak. But what does our faith rest in? It is in Christ who died for us, rose for us, and sits at God's right hand for us. As surely as the object of our faith is Christ, the objects of our love are those beloved by Christ. So as St. Paul says, we presently see through a dim glass, but then we will see him face to face. The love, which binds us together around his precious Word, is difficult for us to see in full right now. But it flows out of the same faith that rests in that same saving Word. So don't count it as a little thing, even while the devil, the world, and your own sinful flesh cloud it with darkness. To your fallen human reason, your faith in Christ and your love for one another may seem tiny and insignificant. But the light will come and prove that Jesus remained faithful in much. Amen.