

**Matthew 25:31-46 + What a Day It Will Be! + Series: What Does This Mean?
Cross of Christ Ev. Lutheran Church – Liverpool, NY
Last Sunday of the Church Year + 26 November 2017**

There are some days you can't wait to experience—Christmas, your birthday, Easter Sunday, your wedding day, the day your child or grandchild is born, the day a church building is dedicated, the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, opening night for the new Star Wars movie, the day you'll see Jesus face to face. There are also some days you dread to experience—the first day of school or the first day back after a long vacation, the day when a loved one goes off to school or moves away, the day of a loved one's funeral, Tax Day, Black Friday, moving day, the day when Jesus will come to judge all people.

Among all those days for which we can't wait or which we dread, there's one Day that fills us with hope and dread—Judgment Day or, as our Lutheran forefathers described it, the Last Day. The Last Day fills us with terror because we still carry around inside each of us a sinful nature that makes us nothing more than a “sack of maggots” as Luther used to describe himself. Yet the Last Day also fills us with joyful and eager hope because we and all the saints made holy in the blood of Jesus will finally see him with our own eyes.

Now today is a day of lasts—the last Sunday of another church year, the last Sunday we're field testing *The Service*, and the last Sunday of our “What Does This Mean?” worship series. Since early September, we've focused on the key Scriptural teachings of the Reformation and why we still hold to those teachings as heirs of the Reformation. It's only fitting, then, that we conclude our series with a look at the Last Day and **WHAT A DAY IT WILL BE!**

It was the final week of Jesus' earthly life. By the end of it, Judas would betray Jesus. The religious leaders would arrest and condemn him, and the Roman government would have him crucified. Jesus would give up his life that very week, but the betrayal and suffering and death hadn't started yet.

Instead, Jesus and his disciples were walking through the vast courts of the temple complex that dominated Jerusalem's skyline. The disciples gawked at the mighty pillars and the giant cut stones that made up the walls and arches around the temple as they departed for the night. When the disciples called his attention to the amazing buildings, Jesus told them a time would come when not a single stone would be left on another. The glorious temple and its grand buildings would be destroyed. Judgment would come.

This got Jesus' disciples thinking not just about the fall of Jerusalem, but the day when Christ would come back to judge the world. **“What will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?”** (Matthew 24:3) They knew their Old Testaments. They knew that the Messiah was going to come in glory to judge the living and the dead, but how? When?

Jesus pointed out all kinds of signs that would remind them and others that the Last Day was coming soon. He explained that only God himself knows when that Day would come, but that makes it all the more necessary to be prepared for his return. **“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. 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. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.”**

It will be the ultimate courtroom scene, but instead of one person or a couple people on trial, **“all the nations”** of the earth, including you and me, will gather before Christ the holy Judge. Christ will come in heavenly glory with the hosts of heaven gathered around his throne. Before us Christ will sit not as the lowly Babe of Bethlehem or the crucified Lamb of God, but rather **“the Ancient of Days,”** the holy Lord of all in all his glory and splendor. We heard the Old Testament prophet Daniel (7:9-10) describe the scene earlier. **“His clothing was as white as snow; the hair of his head was white like wool. His throne was flaming with fire, and its wheels were all ablaze. A river of fire was flowing, coming out from before him.”**

Christ will appear in all his glory and what a terrifying sight it will be! Why? We will be required to stand in the presence of the holy God...and we're sinners! The Judge is all-knowing, all-powerful, all-present, absolutely holy, perfectly just, and, if that's not enough, he established the Law. God has set the bar of obedience to his Law at perfection. Either you keep it 100% perfectly in every thought, word, and action or you face the sentence of eternal death in hell.

With such glorious holiness, Christ will judge every soul—living and dead. Death will be no escape from his judgment. Immediately upon his return, he will divide all people into two groups. In one group, God will reveal those who are **“righteous.”** In the other, God will reveal the wicked, but what's the standard? Are the “righteous”

the people who did so well in their lives that Jesus can't help, but let them into heaven? Are the "wicked" the really "bad" people who obviously deserve hell? How will Christ judge you and me and everyone else on the Last Day?

Over the years, I've studied this section of Scripture, but it really wasn't until I studied this text on Monday morning that Jesus' words finally clicked. It's tempting to read what Jesus has to say in Matthew 25 and think that he lets anyone who is "good" into heaven because of what they've done and condemns all the "bad" people to hell, but that's not what Jesus is saying. Listen to what Jesus 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. 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.'" The ***"righteous"*** reply, "When did we do this for you, Lord?" Jesus answers, ***"I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me."*** Then the ***"righteous"*** will go to eternal life.

Will Jesus reward the ***"righteous"*** for what they've done? No! You see, Jesus welcomes the righteous into heaven because he made us ***"righteous."*** The Greek word for ***"righteous"*** has the idea of one declared not guilty, one made right with God. Jesus was the One who did that for us! Through Jesus, we are blessed by his Father, not because of our works. In fact, we receive blessing and inheritance from the Father before Jesus speaks a single word about our good works. The eternal inheritance of heaven was ours before creation, before we could even attempt to do a good work.

Our lives reflect our God-given, Christ-earned righteousness. We daily do what is right as we carry out our ordinary God-given callings. Why? Jesus has made us righteous. By speaking of our works, Jesus provides evidence of the faith his Holy Spirit planted in our hearts through his Word. We faithfully carry out our callings for the sake of others and out of thanks to God—and through Christ alone, God views our daily, ordinary service as service to him. What a Day it will be when Jesus welcomes us into heaven!

Not so for the wicked. To those who reject or ignore him, Christ will say, ***"Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels."*** Then Christ will present evidence to prove his judgment is just. ***"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."***

Those who do not follow Jesus will object as they recall the good things they thought did in their lives, but Christ 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."*** You see, apart from faith in Jesus and his forgiveness, even the kindest act is ruined with the rot of sin. Civil or polite or neighborly or philanthropic acts are nothing more than filthy rags because do not come from hearts motivated by Christ's love, but only done out of a sense of duty or a desire for the common good or often out of selfishness. They don't flow from faith in Christ, and ***"without faith it is impossible to please God."*** (Hebrews 11:6) What a Day it will be as unbelievers go off to eternal and unceasing punishment in hell.

Yes, Christ will come in terrifying, holy glory, but remember that Jesus is our Judge! He is the Son of Man who once came in mercy as a tiny infant in a stable in Bethlehem, as a humble king riding a donkey into Jerusalem, as a suffering servant making his way to the cross to be lifted up for your sins and mine. He is the Good Shepherd who judges all mankind, who knows every one of his sheep by name, including you and me, who searches high and low for his lost sheep, and who ultimately gave his life for the sheep. He is the Son of Man who reconciled us with God, who lived up to that impossibly high standard of God's holy Law, and who carried out God's impossibly high demand of one sacrifice for all, so God would not count our sins against us. Our righteous Judge is also our defense lawyer as the Apostle Paul writes, ***"Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us."*** (Romans 8:34) The glorious Judge is our Savior from all that can condemn us. For that reason, the Last Day will be a day of unimaginable and eternal joy for us!

On the Last Day, Christ will separate the righteous from the wicked. We will all face his judgment, which terrifies our sinful natures, but it fills us with eager hope because on that Day we will be with Jesus forever. Like the early Christians, like Luther and the Reformers, like believers of every age, we long for the return of the Savior who promised, ***"Yes, I am coming soon."***

So what will we do until then? We faithfully and daily carry out all of our God-given callings. We urgently take the good news of Jesus to others even as we long for his coming again. And when he does come again in glory, may he find us in faith, fruitful in word and deed. By his grace alone, he will give us life with him in the glories of heaven forever. Amen.