



Be Merciful!

Matthew 25:31-46

1. The Judgement Scene (verses 31-33)
2. Are You a Sheep? (verses 34-40)
3. Are You a Goat? (verses 41-46)

For the past two months, we have been looking at the Olivet Discourse, as recorded for us in Matthew 24-25. Time and time again, Jesus has given to us an illustration of what the judgment scene will be like. In chapter 24, Jesus said that the judgment would be swift and unexpected, as in the days of Noah, as in the coming of a thief in the night. And so, he tells us to "be ready" (Matthew 24:44). At the end of chapter 24, Jesus said that the judgment would be like a master returning and seeing a slave busy with the work that he was assigned, or a slave who was slothful and abusing his authority. And so, Jesus tells us to "be faithful." At the beginning of chapter 25, Jesus said that the judgment would be like a wedding feast in which the bridegroom was delayed. Some virgins didn't bring enough oil. Some virgins brought enough oil. And so, Jesus tells us to "be prepared." Last week, in the middle of chapter 25, Jesus compared the kingdom to a man, entrusting his money to his slaves in varying amounts. Some put the money to work and created more money. Another buried the money in the ground, neglecting his duty. And so, Jesus tells us to "be fruitful."

We come this morning to the last of the illustrations that Jesus used to describe His second coming. He describes it as man who looks upon and flock of animals and separates the sheep from the goats. They are divided up. He places the sheep on his right. He places the goats on his left. When applied to people, this implies a separation of those in the world into two distinct categories. The division between the two is evidenced by one's care for the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the prisoner, or, one's indifference to the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked the sick, and the prisoner. And so, the primary application of this story is that we are to "be merciful" (which is the title of my message this morning).

Matthew 25:31-46

But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. And all the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats; and He will put the sheep on His right, and the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on His right, "Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me." Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, "Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You drink? And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You? And when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?" And the King will answer and say to them, "Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me." Then He will also say to those on His left, "Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels; 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; naked, and you did not clothe Me; sick, and in prison, and you did not visit Me." Then they themselves also will answer, saying, "Lord, when did we see You hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not take care of You?" Then He will answer them, saying, "Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me." And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.

In most of the illustrations that Jesus gives us in His discourse, the judgment comes at the end of the story. It's when the master comes back that he deals with his servants (24:45-51; 25:14-30). It's when the bridegroom enters the wedding feast that the foolish virgins are dealt with (24:1-13). But, in this illustration, Jesus deals with the judgment head on! The judgment is the first thing that He brings to our attention. The judgment consumes the entire story. It is all about that final day, when we stand before Jesus to give account for our lives.

Let's look at my first point, ...

1. The Judgement Scene (verses 31-33).

Jesus begins this story by establishing the time in which these things take place. They take place, "when the Son of Man comes in His glory." Jesus picks up on the terminology of Matthew 24:30, when Jesus describes the time when the whole earth will "see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory" (Matt. 24:30). This talks about the time of His return to earth. When He comes, the whole world will see Him. The whole world will know that it is Jesus returning to judge the world.

When Jesus comes, He will claim the throne that is rightfully His. He will establish His kingdom. This is what it means in verse 31 when Jesus says that the Son of Man "will sit on His glorious throne" (verse 31). The throne is the seat of authority. This "glorious" throne is the seat of "all authority." When Jesus sits upon the throne, it will be a demonstration to all that the authority over all time and eternity has been established and granted. In verse 34, Jesus begins a shift to identifying the one sitting upon the throne as "The King," (which is what verse 31

is already hinting at).

At this point, Psalm 2 comes into my mind. When the nation are resisting the authority of God, the LORD Himself says, "I have installed My King upon Zion, My holy mountain. ... I will surely give the nations as Your inheritance, and the very ends of the earth as Your possession" (Ps. 2:6, 8). Jesus is coming back as fully sovereign over all!

But, Jesus doesn't come all alone. He comes with "all the angels" (verse 31). This is entirely consistent with the other accounts that Jesus gave of His coming. In the parable of the wheat and the tares, it is the angels who come and reap the harvest. They "will gather out of His kingdom all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness" (Matt. 13:41). In the parable of the dragnet, it is the angels who "take out the wicked from among the righteous" (Matt. 13:49). In Matthew 24:31, the angels are the ones who gather together His elect (Matt. 24:31).

In our text this morning, Jesus is coming with "all the angels," who will certainly help in the dividing between the sheep and the goats. You might liken these angels to security staff at a ball game or a concert. They are the ones wearing the bright yellow vests with "Security" written on the back. When you approach a gate, they will look at your ticket and tell you where to go. If you are trying to enter into one of the lower box-seat areas, they will turn you back down the ramp and up to the area where you need to go in order to find your seat. If you are in the right section, they will point to the proper way in which you ought to go to find your seat. This gathering (and separating process) comes in verses 32 and 33, where the picture that we get is of Jesus, Himself separating "all the nations" into two groups. When you harmonize this with the other texts of Scripture, you see the angels are involved in this process as well. Though, ultimately, it is Jesus who oversees everything, and is responsible for where each person ends up.

The groups are pictured here as "sheep" and "goats." As Jesus does so well, He uses pictures of daily events that help to ingrain the scene into our minds. Though sheep and goats are about the same size and look similar to one another, if you have a trained eye of a shepherd, it's not too difficult to differentiate between a sheep and a goat. You can look at their tails. The tail of a goat goes up (unless in distress). The tail of a sheep hangs down (if it hasn't been cut off). You can look at their diets. Goats like to browse: eating leaves, twigs, vines and shrubs, while standing erect. Sheep like to graze: eating grass and clover, while bending over. In this scene, there appears to be no difficulty at all in distinguishing between them. The sheep are placed at the right hand of Jesus. The goats are placed at the left hand of Jesus.

This is the great reality of all of our lives. When Jesus says that "all the nations will be gathered before Him" (verse 32), I believe that this means that everyone who has ever lived will be gathered to Jesus. Those who are alive at His return will be escorted by angels into that scene. Those who have died before His return will be resurrected so that they might stand before Jesus (1 Thess. 4:15-16). The judgment is a great reality of your life. Hebrews 9:27 says that "it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment." When you look at your life with the broadest of views, you see several major events: (1) You are born. (2) You will die. (3) You will be judged. Which means that every single one of us are in this story.

Perhaps you have gone to a ball game and have come home to watch the highlights on the evening news. You sat out in the bleachers of Wrigley Field. A certain homerun was hit into your section. As the camera followed the home-run ball, you were desperately looking for yourself in the scene. But, the camera was too far away to focus clearly enough for you to see yourself on television. It's a little bit like this scene. Jesus just told us of the two crowds that will be assembled before Him: the sheep and the goats. The camera is focused to capture the entire panorama of the judgment. But, should Jesus focus His camera in on the scene, down to the individual sheep and goats, we would be able to identify each and every one of us. You will be there.

The major question before us this morning is this: Where will you be? will you be escorted to the right hand of Jesus? Or, will you be escorted to the left hand of Jesus? These are the two questions that I want to ask of you this morning: Are you a sheep? Are you a goat?

We have set (1) The Judgement Scene (verses 31-33). Now, let's ask my first question, ...
2. Are You a Sheep? (verses 34-40)

In verses 34-40, Jesus speaks first to the sheep, giving them an invitation. This invitation is not given to the goats. It is given only to the sheep. Jesus will say, "Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" (verse 34).

This is the greatest invitation that you will ever receive. It is an invitation to the greatest party that you will ever attend. I received an invitation this week in the mail. It is from a distant relative, who lives in California. It reads, "The Graduating Class of Two-Thousand Five announces the Forty-fourth Commencement Exercises of Saratoga High School Friday afternoon, June tenth four-thirty o'clock at Upper Field Saratoga High School" (in California). This may well be a grand time. I'm certain that they will play "Pomp and Circumstance" at this graduation ceremony. But, the "pomp" and "circumstance" of this heavenly party will far outweigh the "pomp" and "circumstance" of any graduation ceremony. It will be the biggest, the grandest, and the most glorious of occasions.

If you arrive at the right hand of Jesus, your soul will be greatly blessed. If you are there, your soul will be rich! Look at verse 34 a bit more carefully. Those who are invited are identified as being "blessed of My Father." Those who are invited will "inherit the kingdom." This party is a bit like Christmas as a child, when you receive an abundance of gifts. When you arrive, you be showered with an incredible gift: you will receive the kingdom!

At that moment, all of your hopes of heaven will be realized. Try as you like to picture in your mind of the joys of heaven. On that day, your experience will far outweigh your wildest imaginations. You will inherit the kingdom, which means that you will be there and will be able to enjoy all of its joys and pleasures. When we think of our inheritance, we think about what will be given to us when our parents pass away. Most often, their earthly possessions go to their children. People inherit houses or land or bank accounts or stocks. But, imagine inheriting the kingdom of God! This is what verse 34 says that we will inherit! It is a wonderful place. It's a place where there is no sorrow or tears. It's a place where there is no sin. It's a place where you will enjoy perfect fellowship with God!

This isn't a idea that simply came around in recent days. From the foundation of the world, the Lord has prepared His kingdom for His sheep (verse 34). When God was saying, "Let there be light," He was already preparing His kingdom. It took him six days to create the universe. It has taken him thousands of years to prepare His kingdom. It will be wonderful.

The heart of the passage comes in verse 35, when Jesus gives His explanation about why the sheep will arrive in the kingdom. He said, "For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me" (verses 35-36).

Jesus here gives six expression of mercy that the sheep did. (1) They gave food. (2) They gave water. (3) They gave housing. (4) They gave clothing. (5) They extended compassion to the sick. (6) They visited those in prison.

All agree, the world over, of how these actions demonstrate mercy. Christians and non-Christians alike are agreed that giving food and water to those who are hungry and thirsty is an act of love for our fellow human beings. Countless religious and secular organizations have as their main purpose to feed the hungry. Even in our own city, a food bank has been established to help those who are hungry. Christians and non-Christians alike are agreed that providing shelter and clothing for those who lack is a worthy cause. Organizations such as Habitat for Humanity will build homes for those who desperately need it. In our city, there are places where you can give your clothing to help those who need clothes. Hospitals recognize the kindness of those who come and visit the sick. Prisons recognize the need for those to come and visit the prisoners.

People in this world know and recognize when others are doing a good and kind deed. An example is Mother Theresa. She was lifted up in the eyes of the world, as doing great good. In 1962, she received the Pandma Shri prize for "extraordinary services." In 1971, Pope Paul VI honored her with a peace prize. In 1972, she was awarded a prize from the Indian government for her work (the Jawaharlal Nehru Award for International Understanding). In 1979, She won the Nobel Peace Prize. In 1985, President Reagan presents her the Medal of Freedom, the highest U.S. civilian award. In 1996, she becomes only the fourth person in the world to receive an honorary U.S. citizenship. Since her death in 1997, there has been an intense movement to canonize her as a saint. She received all of these awards for dedicating her life to acts of mercy. We all see this. These are the sorts of things that Jesus will point out in those standing before him in judgement.

The most interesting thing in our text this morning is that Jesus said that the sheep did these acts of mercy to Him. Six times in verses 34 and 35, Jesus said that these were done to Him. "You gave **Me** something to eat, ... you gave **Me** drink, ... you invited **Me** in, ... you clothed **Me**, ... you visited **Me**, ... you came to **Me**." These sheep were dumbfounded. They said, "When did we do these things to you? We don't remember when You were hungry. We don't remember when You were thirsty. We don't remember You being a stranger. We don't remember You being naked. We don't remember You being sick. We don't remember You being in prison. What crime did You commit?" (a loose paraphrase of verses 37-39).

I believe that the surprise of these sheep helps us to see that the sheep often aren't even aware of the full impact of the merciful things that they are doing. Their surprise helps us to show that they were never expecting to earn their way into heaven by helping others in time of need. If the sheep thought in their mind that their deeds of mercy would earn their way into heaven, they certainly would have thought highly about all of the wonderful things that they had been doing year in and year out to earn their salvation.

I'm here to tell you that you don't get into heaven by being merciful. The Scripture is abundantly clear: "By grace have you been saved, through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast" (Eph. 2:8-9). Works of kindness and mercy don't save you. But, as is obvious in this passage, works of kindness and mercy are important! They are evidences of your being saved. That's why Paul continues on in Ephesians 2 with the following verse: "For we were created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:10).

If you think that you are saved, but have no works that give evidence that you are saved by the blood of Christ, the Bible says that your faith is dead. Genuine faith will work! Consider the following scripture passage:

James 2:14-17

What use is it, my brethren, if a man says he has faith, but he has no works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and be filled," and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that? Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself.

He says, "if you claim to have a faith, but have no works, your faith is dead and useless. You are not a sheep, but a goat." Notice how James uses the same illustrations that Jesus did. He talked about those without food or clothing. Simply wishing them well demonstrates a lack of faith according to James. Paul wrote of similar people, who "profess to know God, but by their deeds they deny Him" (Titus 1:16).

This is a common theme in the Bible. You are saved by grace. But that grace that saves produces works. And on the judgment day, Jesus will look at the works that they did and will divide between the sheep and the goats based upon their deeds, because it is your works that will give testimony to your faith. This is what forms the division between the sheep and the goats. Those who were merciful to others demonstrate themselves to be sheep. Those who weren't merciful to others demonstrate themselves to be goats.

This is what Jesus gets at in verse 40 when Jesus, the King and judge, explains how things in this life work. He said, "Truly I say to you...." (Whenever Jesus says, "Truly," it means, "pay attention, because the things that I am about to say are really, really important for you to hear and understand and believe.") He said, "Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me" (verse 40). In other words, the manner in which you treat the brothers and sisters of Christ, is equivalent to treating Jesus in the exact same way. See, there is a connection between Jesus and His people. To feed His brothers and sisters is to feed Jesus. To give drink to His brothers and sisters is to give drink to Jesus. To house His brothers and sisters is to house Jesus. To clothe His brothers

and sisters is to clothe Jesus. To visit His brothers and sisters when sick or in prison is to visit Jesus.

The question rightly comes up, "Who are the brothers and sisters of Jesus?" I believe that the Bible is quite clear on this. The brothers of Jesus is the church of Jesus Christ. Jesus never uses the terms, "my brothers" or "my sisters" to refer to unbelievers. He always uses those terms to describe His followers. The story at the end of Matthew 12 puts this forth very clearly. When His earthly mothers and brothers were seeking Him, Jesus said, "Who is my mother and who are My brothers?" (Matt. 12:48). Then, stretching out His hand toward His disciples, He said, "Behold, My mother and My brothers! For whoever does the will of My Father who is in heaven, he is My brother and sister and mother" (Matt. 12:49-50).

To love and care for His brothers and sisters is to love Jesus. We are the body of Christ. To care for the body is to care for the head (1 Cor. 12:12-31). To receive His brothers and sisters is to receive Jesus. When Jesus sent out His disciples to preach the gospel of the kingdom of heaven, He told His disciples, "He who receives you receives Me" (Matt. 10:40). To persecute His brothers and sisters is to persecute Jesus. When Saul was persecuting the church, Jesus appeared to him in a vision and said, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" (Acts 9:4).

Having said that, however, let me warn you not to turn your back upon those in need. Don't use Jesus' words to simply think that you only need to be kind and gracious to those in the church. If you know of an unbeliever with a specific need, and you have the resources to meet that need, show mercy to them and help them. Though Jesus places His emphasis upon His church, I don't believe that this in any way excludes those outside the church. If God has transformed your heart, mercy will be in you and it will simply gush out upon all who come into contact with you. It won't come out based upon some judgment of yours. Galatians 6:10 ought to be our motto: "So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith." In other words, "Let your life be patterned by works of charity, doing good to all men, regardless of whether or not they are a Christian. But when it gets down to it, make the church your priority in doing merciful deeds."

And so, I ask, "How are you doing in these acts of mercy?" Are you feeding poor people? Are you providing shelter and clothing to those without? Are you taking others into your home? Are you visiting the shut-ins? When was the last time that you visited the prisons? Where are your deeds of mercy?" As a church, we will have great opportunities to do these things in Nepal. They are one of the poorest of nations in this world. We are one of the richest. There are hungry people in Nepal. There are people needing houses and clothes. There are sick people. At times, people are imprisoned for preaching the gospel in Nepal. We will have great opportunities over the next few years to help in these areas.

But, let us not think that our church's ministry to Nepal will satisfy all of these things on the day of judgement. As I prepared my message this week, I listened to a man giving a sermon on this text. He spent the entire message talking about how many things their church was doing to meet these sorts of needs. This man pastors a large church with many outreach ministries going on. I was encouraged by everything that his church was doing. I was convicted of the lack of things that our church is doing. In some ways, it is able to be attributed to the size of the church. In many ways, it's because that is where the heart of the people is. But what did strike me about his message is that the thrust of it was that if you are giving to the church, look at all of the wonderful things that your money is doing. By giving, you are doing these things.

But, in the words of Jesus, I want for you to see that there is no talk of "I gave money to feed the poor. I gave money to house the homeless. I gave money to support the local pregnancy care center. I gave money to support Chuck Coleson's prison ministry. The talk is this: "You gave Me something to eat. You gave Me drink. You invited Me in. You clothed Me. You visited Me. You came to Me." This is calling us to personal involvement in these types of things. As wonderful as Nepal is for us to really help those in a needy country, the fact is that many of you will never have an opportunity to go. Certainly, you can give to this. I encourage you to give of your money to this. It's a wonderful thing. You will be blessed in giving. As Jesus said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35). But, you need to see the importance of your own personal involvement in these things.

Perhaps you say, "Where will I find these people?" You could get involved at the local pregnancy care center. There are many needy people there, especially the babies who are fighting for their lives. You could get involved at the Rockford Rescue Mission. There are many needy people there who have hit rock bottom in their lives. There are certainly opportunities to help there.

You will find them right here at Rock Valley Bible Church. There are people here who are struggling financially. Giving food and drink to them would come as a wonderful blessing. There are people here who are having difficulty meeting their rent payment. Giving money to help them meet their need would be a wonderful blessing. There are people here who are strangers to you. Inviting them into your home would bring wonderful blessing to them and to you. There are people here at Rock Valley Bible Church who need visiting. Visiting them at the nursing home would bring great blessing to them. Visiting those who are housebound would be a wonderful act of mercy.

There have been times that people have been critical of Rock Valley Bible Church saying that we don't have much diversity among us. By in large, we are middle class people living in nice houses. By in large, we are in our 30's or 40's, married, and with a quiver full of children. By in large, our jobs support us pretty well. The criticism comes: where are those brothers who Jesus calls "the least of these"? (verse 40). You know what I'm talking about. Those with different skin color. Those with different economic statuses. Those who are difficult to love. Where are the single people?

Let me simply say that we have had those sorts of people come into our midst. We have had those sorts of people leave, because nobody reaches out to them to love them and help them and serve them. If we want to be a church with much diversity, then each of us need to be about demonstrating mercy to those who are more difficult to love, by inviting them into your house, sharing your resources with them, giving when there is a need, and visiting them to encourage them.

This week, as many of you know, my family was out of town. Many of you showed mercy and kindness to me. Every night that I was free, I spent it with a family from this church, having dinner. I had to turn down three or four other dinner opportunities, because I didn't have enough evenings in which to fulfill them. One man helped me blacktop my driveway. I didn't know how to do it, so he was willing to come and help me. Over several days, he spent more than eight hours with me working on my driveway together. For such kindness show to me, I am

grateful. Perhaps you might find it easy to serve me, as I'm the pastor of this church. But, Jesus calls us to do it to "the least of these." Jesus calls us to help those with real need. I encourage you to look around and think about those whom you would consider to be "the least." Then, ask yourself, "what kindness and mercy have I shown to them?" If you haven't, I exhort you to get around to it.

How are you doing? If you want to be a sheep and enter into the "joy of your master" (Matt. 25:21, 23), then your life should be full of these sorts of merciful deeds, because those who don't are goats. This leads me to my next point. We have seen (1) The Judgement Scene (verses 31-33). I have asked you, (2) Are You a Sheep? (verses 34-40). And now, I ask you, ...

3. Are You a Goat? (verses 41-46)

What was true of the sheep was not true of the goats. The sheep were on the right, but the goats were on the left (verse 33). The sheep were blessed (verse 34), but the goats were cursed (verse 41). The sheep demonstrated their love to Jesus in their merciful deeds to others (verses 35-36), but the goats had no deeds to testify of their love to Jesus (verses 42-43). The sheep were invited and welcomed into their inheritance of the kingdom (verse 34), but the goats were sent away from Jesus "into the eternal fire" (verse 41). Verse 46 puts it as clear as any verse in this passage. "And these [goats] will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

There are many today who will teach that hell isn't a real place, or that hell will only be temporary, or that those who fail to reach heaven will simply be annihilated. Those who teach these things cannot deal with verse 46 with any level of honesty at all. I don't understand how anybody, who believes the teaching of the Scripture that believes in Christ will live in heaven forever, can have any other view than that those who aren't in heaven will suffer punishment forever. Notice the parallelism in verse 46. There is eternal life. There is eternal punishment. Jesus uses the same word here for "eternal." It means, "everlasting," or "endless time."

As long as those in heaven enjoy the life that God gives to them. So will be the length of time that those in hell will experience punishment. "Eternal punishment" means that punishment will go on constantly for eternity. This is one of the most horrific pictures in all of the Bible given for the fate of those who face a Christless eternity. The punishment that Jesus received on the cross was awful, but imagine being crucified forever. Being burned to death is an awful way to die, but imagine burning forever. This is the picture that Jesus used in Luke 16 of what hell is like. Jesus told of a rich man as facing constant "agony in [the] flame" (Luke 16:24). Do you know why he was suffering so much? Because the rich man lived a life of luxury and turned his back upon the poor man, who longed "to be fed with the crumbs which were falling from the rich man's tables" (Luke 16:21). The rich man hadn't repented of his sin (Luke 16:30). The rich man's lack of repentance was demonstrated in his lack of mercy for this poor man.

Jonathan Edwards once preached a sermon on Matthew 25:46 entitled, "The Eternity of Hell's Torments." In that sermon, he dealt with two objections to the eternity of hell: the justice of God and the mercy of God. People argue that punishing someone for eternity simply isn't a just thing to do. To this, Edwards replied that those who make this objection simply don't understand the wickedness of sin. He writes, (you may want to read this slow, as it is a bit difficult, but well worth the effort), ...

"It is not inconsistent with the justice of God to inflict an eternal punishment. ... If the evil of sin be infinite, as the punishment is, then it is manifest that the punishment is no more than proportionable to the sin punished, and is no more than sin deserves. And if the obligation to love, honor, and obey God be infinite, then sin which is the violation of this obligation, is a violation of infinite obligation, and so is an infinite evil. ... Sin being an infinite evil, deserves an infinite punishment. An infinite punishment is no more than it deserves. Therefore such punishment is just."

When dealing with the objection that eternal punishment is inconsistent with the mercy of God, Edwards wrote, ...

"It would be a great defect, and not a perfection, in the sovereign and supreme Judge of the world, to be merciful in such a sense that he could not bear to have penal justice executed. It is a very unscriptural notion of the mercy of God. The Scriptures everywhere represent the mercy of God as free and sovereign, and not that the exercises of it are necessary, so that God cannot bear justice should take place. ... If there be any meaning in the objection, this is supposed in it, that all misery of the creature, whether just or unjust, is in itself contrary to the nature of God. ... [They suppose that] the mercy of God being infinite, all misery must be contrary to his nature, which we see to be contrary to fact. For we see that God in his providence, does indeed inflict very great calamities on mankind even in this life.

If God's mercy doesn't prevent punishment in this life, why would we expect it not to take place in the life to come? And if punishment will take place in the life to come, why would we not expect it to be an infinite punishment, since the sin against an infinite God was infinite? This is what God's justice demands! In no way does His free mercy have to intercede in these events.

We can understand these things a bit by understanding a judge in our judicial system. Suppose there was a mass murderer, who was clearly guilty of murdering hundreds (perhaps thousands) of people. Now, suppose that the judge who presided over his trial would say, "I am a merciful man. I see your charges. You are free to go." The world would cry with outrage at this! Justice must be served or the judge is not doing his job. So also with God.

Notice the sins for which the goats are condemned to hell. They are sins of omission. They are things that the goats failed to do. In this parable, Jesus doesn't even begin to address the wicked things that the goats did. He doesn't even get to the point of telling them that they were greedy and selfish and blasphemers and adulterers and drunkards and idolaters. He doesn't even address these things. He sends them to hell for their sins of omission.

How many people today spend their lives, consumed with their own affairs. They put their time in at the job. They come home to their nice little family. They enjoy endless evenings around the television set. They attend church each Sunday. They live upright, moral lives. They

abstain from alcohol. They avoid the "R" rated movies. Husbands and wives are faithful to one another. They even pray before their dinners. But when it comes down to showing genuine mercy to others who happen to live outside of their four little walls, they utterly fail to do anything. These are the sorts of people that will find themselves in a Christless eternity. Church goers who aren't demonstrating mercy to others.

As I entitled my message this morning, "Be Merciful!" I struggled a bit. My exhortation to you isn't to go out and do merciful things so that you insure yourself a place in heaven. Rather, my exhortation to you is of the importance manifesting your faith in the way that you help others with the difficulties of life. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy" (Matt. 5:7). In other words, "Blessed are those who have a genuine compassion and care for those who have real needs, because God will show incredible kindness and compassion and mercy to them at the day of judgment." He didn't command people to be merciful. He simply made the observation that those who were merciful would receive mercy at the day of judgement.

What sort of proof do you have that you have been merciful to others? How much have you given away to meet the needs of others? Food, clothing, money, etc. How many strangers have you taken into your home? How much of your time has been spent in visiting those who can't get out?

There is a phrase that we often use. We say, "The proof is in the pudding." What we mean by that is that you won't know how the food turned out until you actually taste it! We can easily apply it here: It's not the saying that gives verification. It's the doing. It's not the saying that you love Jesus that gives you any credence to your faith in Christ. It's when you see it in action that you know that your faith is real. This is what Jesus is talking about in our text this morning: Is your faith real? Real faith will demonstrate itself in deeds of mercy. False faith will expose itself in no mercy shown to others.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on June 5, 2005 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.
