

Lesson 18

Proper 29

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 25:31–46

When Jesus referred to Himself in relation to His saving work, He usually avoided the title *Messiah*, which means “the anointed one.” *Christ* is the same word but from the Greek language. Among the Jews it had been associated mainly with the promise of a kingly messiah who would establish David’s throne forever. It had taken on definitely political overtones as they longed for someone to free them from Roman domination.

Jesus usually referred to Himself as “the Son of Man.” Also “Son of Man” was a messianic title drawn from Daniel’s prophetic vision, but it was not as commonly used—and surely was not suggestive of a glorious earthly kingdom of Israel, as “messiah” could be construed to mean. In Jesus’ parable of the sheep and the goats, a picture of the final judgment, the full thrust of the apocalyptic meaning of “Son of Man” comes through. His story is about the coming of the Son of Man, accompanied by all His angels, to sit on His throne in heavenly glory.

271. What is the obvious purpose for which all nations will be gathered before the glorious Son of Man on His throne? On what basis will He separate the sheep from the goats? (See John 3:16–18, 36.)

It is important to note that the King’s “Come, you who are blessed by My Father” to those on His right and His “Depart from Me, you cursed” to those on His left, as well as His words about their serving Him or not serving Him, all are spoken after the separation has already taken place. Martin Franzmann says in *Follow Me*: “Before a word is spoken or any deed of man is told, the Shepherd separates the nations and places them at his right hand and his left. He is the Judgment in person; the Christ Himself divides” (p. 183). (See Luke 12:49–53; Matthew 10:34–39.)

272. Since the separation and its eternal consequences had already been determined, why does the King make such a point of “as you did/did not do it to one of the least of these My brothers”?

273. Whom does He mean by “the least of these My brothers”? What is the point of His saying, “As you did/did not do it to one of the least of these, My brothers, you did/did not do it to Me”?

Franzmann adds in *Follow Me*:

Whether a man has been for Him or against Him has shown itself, not in men's pious sentiments but in their deeds. And the King, the righteous Judge, unrolls the history of men before all eyes to show how the verdict which His action has pronounced has long since been written by the deeds of men. All deeds of mercy done to the least of these whom He in mercy calls His brethren have been a Yea to Him. . . . All deeds of mercy left undone have been a Nay to Him. (p. 183)

274. What does this parable encourage in us, who rejoice that “one is justified by faith apart from works of the law”? (Romans 3:28; see also Galatians 5:6; James 2:14–26.)

275. What are some practical ways in which you can serve Jesus in serving the needy?

276. What if you were to take the approach “I’m saved by grace through faith; why should I bother to do works of service?”

The Old Testament Lesson: Ezekiel 34:11–16, 20–24

Ezekiel, whose name means “God strengthens,” was God’s prophet during the dark days of Judah’s exile in Babylon. Jerusalem and the temple had been destroyed. Ezekiel warned of prolonged judgment. The Jews were not to expect early release from exile, but were to work at being at peace with themselves and with the Lord in their circumstances in exile. However, Ezekiel also gave hope by speaking of the restoration God would bring His people.

Chapter 34 begins with the Lord taking the shepherds, the religious leaders, to task for being derelict and self-serving in the performance of their duties—to the detriment of the flock. They were told that they would be removed from their privileged positions. (See Ezekiel 34:1–10.) Then, in this lesson, the Lord promised that He would enter the situation and Himself become the faithful, caring Shepherd His people needed.

277. What are the two thrusts that would be embodied in the concern the sovereign Lord would display upon becoming the Shepherd of the sheep? (See Luke 15:3–7; Psalm 23.)

278. What does this say to us about the responsibilities of all who want to serve faithfully as this Shepherd’s under-shepherds?

279. When would the promised restoration of the Shepherd's flock take place?

We fully appreciate a loving Shepherd who searches for the lost and brings back the strays, who builds up the injured and strengthens the weak, but it surely is strange to hear the Shepherd say, "The fat and the strong I will destroy." It is not just shepherds but also the sheep who come under the judging scrutiny of the sovereign Lord as the Shepherd. See what He says to the sheep in verses 17–22.

280. Since David had been dead for more than three hundred years when Ezekiel prophesied, who is "My servant David" who would be the "one shepherd" of God's flock and "prince" among God's people?

281. How does this Old Testament Lesson tie in with today's Holy Gospel?

The Epistle for the Day: 1 Corinthians 15:20–28

Paul knew that the Greek Christians were not stumbling over the resurrection of Jesus Himself, the Word made flesh, so much as the idea that all of them, as ordinary Christians, would also be raised from the dead. So he had confronted their doubts with a straightforward argument: "If the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins" (vv. 16–17).

Paul insisted that the facts of the matter were clearly seen in the historical evidence to which he had pointed them. "In fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep." The New Testament is unequivocal in its testimony to the bodily resurrection of Jesus. In the Greek text, Jesus says, "A spirit does not have flesh [*sarx*] and bones [*ostea*] as you see that I have." These words unmistakably affirm His full humanity also in His resurrection body, as did also His invitation to His disciples to touch Him and His eating in their presence. (See Luke 24:36–42.)

Today's American Christians must contend with the ideas of New Age offshoots of Greek philosophy and Eastern religions, which speak of the immortality of the spirit, sometimes through many reincarnations. The final goal in their systems is to be released from the cycle of earthly existences and to be absorbed again into the universal spirit. The Christian hope that Paul and the other apostles propounded, however, is more than an immortality of the spirit. It is the resurrection of the body, the whole human being, to a continued personal identity in the new heavens and new earth.

282. Of what does Jesus' becoming "the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep" assure us?

283. To underscore the victory Christ has won for us, Paul contrasted it with the human predicament. He wrote that “by a man [Adam] came death” and “in Adam all die.” What is the theological term for this universal human condition of sinfulness and death?

284. Paul followed that with “by a man [Jesus Christ] has come also the resurrection of the dead.” Why was it essential in God’s plan of salvation for humanity that a man, His Son in human flesh, share our experience of death and rise again in victory?

285. The victory of Jesus over death took place at a point in human history, AD 30, and at a specific geographic place, outside the walls of Jerusalem. When and where will the victory be fully displayed and the last enemy, death, be destroyed for all people?

286. When Christ “delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power” and “the Son Himself will also be subjected to Him who put all things in subjection under Him,” will this be a demotion for the One who has been highly exalted and given the name that is above every name? What is Paul saying in this? (See Revelation 5:11–14; 11:15.)