

SLIDE 1

Ron Williamson was a promising baseball athlete from a small town called Ada in Oklahoma. He experienced great success throughout high school in baseball and looked forward to a career in the major leagues. He dreamed of becoming the next Micky Mantle – the famous Oklahoman who played for the New York Yankees. But Ron's life went off the rails. He got into heavy drinking and eventually squandered his opportunity to play professional. He bounced around different minor league teams for several years. Eventually he returned home. And he had occasional run-ins with the law for drunk driving.

SLIDE 1.1 – Mugshot

So Ron was known to police. When a waitress from a night club was murdered in Ada in 1982, Ron was an immediate suspect. He lived a few blocks away from the waitress' apartment. He often visited the night club where she worked. But no one had seen her with him the night of the murder except a notorious criminal who had been seen with her was serving 40 years in prison for other crimes. The prosecutor however, believed Ron was guilty and founded his case on this criminal's testimony. The small town clamored for an arrest wondering who among them could do such terrible things.

So the district attorney had Ron and another man named Dennis Fritz arrested for the murder. This is Ron's mug shot from that day. Then they went to jury trial. There were multiple problems with the case. Ron couldn't afford legal counsel. So he was assigned a public defender who was blind. Since there were no further funds for his defense team, Ron's lawyer couldn't see any evidence presented nor did he receive much help in working through documents given by the prosecution. It came out during the trial that the prosecution withheld some evidence that may have helped Ron. But the Judge decided that he would rule on this after the trial was over. Ron also struggled with mental health issues. He would sometimes shout out his innocence during the trial which irritated the judge.

In 1988, a jury convicted Ron and Dennis of the murder. Both were sentenced to death. Ron was soon transferred to death row. Because of his mental health issues, he would sometimes stand at his cell door and yell about his innocence for hours. Other inmates and the guards hated him. He and his family received notice that his execution would occur in one month's time.

Every death penalty was reviewed for possible appeals. But because of limited resources, some cases didn't get much reviews. Yet those looking at Ron's case saw multiple flaws in his conviction. Eventually, they convinced a judge to stay Ron's execution until these issues could be looked at. Ron escaped a lethal injection that was only five days away.

SLIDE 1.2 - Acquittal

With the reprieve, those working on his file began to see more and more flaws. Finally, a judge received their work and authored a lengthy criticism of the conviction. He exposed mistakes by police, suppression of evidence by the prosecution, multiple flaws in the judge's decisions and mistakes by Ron's lawyer. This criticism resulted in a full review of both Ron and Dennis' trial. Finally the review judge reversed the verdict in 1999. The two pictures on the right show the moment of and moments after this dismissal of charge – you can see by the faces of the people behind them that most were unhappy with this decision. Ron was released after serving 11 years on death row. He continued to struggle with addictions and died an early death of 51 from cirrhosis – a disease of the liver often caused by heavy drinking. The story is told in one of John Grisham's book called "An Innocent Man."

Now can you imagine standing before a judge who has the power of your life or death in their hands? I have no experience similar to Ron's. I've never stood before a judge who pronounces a verdict over me. But if I did, I would hope the judge would be fair, impartial and just.

Yet though we may not face a judge on earth with such power over our lives, we will certainly face a judge at the end of history when Jesus returns. The Bible consistently talks about the Day of the Lord or Judgment Day throughout the Old and New Testaments. If you were to face Jesus on that day and He asked you why He should let you into heaven, what would your answer be?

Well today, we are going to find out more about that day. Jesus reveals it to us in his final teaching on the End Times in the Gospel of Matthew. He has mentioned the reality of Judgment Day earlier in this Gospel. But today's text will lay out more clearly the joy and sorrow that day will bring.

We are going to learn 3 more lessons that we need to prepare for it. We will also learn the answer to Jesus' question about why He should let us into heaven. My hope is that you will leave here today sobered by the reality of Judgment Day. But if you know Christ, I pray you will also leave hopeful and encouraged because of Christ's work on your behalf and the life he calls you to before this day arrives.

Matthew 25:31-46 (ESV) (Insert via Easyworship)

³¹ “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. ³² Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³ And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. ³⁴ Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. ³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’ ³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? ³⁸ And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you?’ ³⁹ And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ ⁴⁰ And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’

⁴¹ “Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. ⁴² For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, ⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ ⁴⁴ Then they 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 minister to you?’ ⁴⁵ Then he will answer them, saying, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ ⁴⁶ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

This passage answers the question “what will happen at the final judgment?” It starts when the “Son of Man” comes in His glory. The Son of Man is a title Jesus used of himself. It comes from a passage we’ve repeatedly referred to this spring and summer – Daniel 7. There the prophet relays a vision he had of one like a son of man. He is presented before the Ancient of Days, who is God. The Son of Man is given dominion, glory and a kingdom that all peoples, nations and languages should serve him. Jesus adopts this title to describe Himself.

He will one day come in glory with all the angels. So this will be a magnificent, earth stopping event. This won’t be some minor ripple in the day’s news. Everything will stop – traffic; business; classes; cooking; working; stock markets; vacationing. Everyone will stop and somehow be aware of this dramatic appearance of the glorious Son of Man. Then he will sit on His glorious throne which in this instance is like a Judge’s bench. But this judge is absolutely pure and just. No one can bribe Him; irritate Him or blind Him to the truth. He Himself is absolutely and completely holy.

Before Him will be gathered all the nations. This is a way to describe all people. It’s not that the nation of Canada will stand before Christ but people from all nations will gather before Him. From Matthew 24:31 we know that the angels go out to gather all of God’s people of every era from the four corners of the universe. Those who did not believe in Christ will also be gathered here.

SLIDE 2 – The Sheep and the Goats

Then Jesus Himself will somehow engage in an act of separation. He will divide all those present into two groups. One group He will place to His right and another group to His left. Jesus gives us an image to grasp this process. He will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. Now we might think why would a shepherd need to do that? Wouldn't they easily see that sheep are white and goats are a darker color? And why would a shepherd run sheep and goats together in the same herd?

In some parts of the world, sheep are very white and goats are darker. They are not herded together. But in the first century Israel, sheep and goats were herded together. The sheep were darker in color than white and goats were lighter than black, so that from a distance it may have been difficult to tell the difference between the two. When you think of that mass of humanity before Jesus on Judgment Day, only He would know the difference between those who trusted him and those who did not. So He divides everyone in these two groups and will now pronounce Judgment.

SLIDE 3 - Lesson 1 - At the end of human history as we know it, Jesus will return to earth to reign and to judge all humanity. This again is the consistent testimony of the Bible. In the end, there will be an accounting. It's like the master we saw in last week's parable the master comes home to settle accounts with His servants.

Then Jesus makes His first judgement. Verse 34 – Then the King will say to those on his right. Remember, this is the Tuesday before the crucifixion. Yet Jesus already calls Himself the King. He was the King during His time on earth but his Kingdom was not of the world. But when He returns, His invisible kingdom will suddenly become visible for all to see.

Jesus blesses those on his right and invites them to enter the kingdom prepared for them from the foundation of the world. So this is very good news for those on the right. They/we will receive their inheritance. They/we will see all their dreams and hopes fulfilled beyond Their/our wildest expectations.

But Jesus does not only invite them into this glorious kingdom. He explains why they are admitted to the kingdom. "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat; "I was thirsty and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you clothed me. I was sick and you visited me. I was in prison and you came to me." So here's the answer to the question if Jesus would ask "Why should I let you into heaven" or this glorious kingdom. Is this what you expected?

Wouldn't you expect that the answer should have been something like, "I put my faith in you; I trusted you for my salvation; I prayed a prayer to receive you at a camp; I depended on you to save me and not myself." But Jesus doesn't point out any of those explanations as reasons for His decision. He points to their actions.

But the people on the right don't understand. They can't remember a time when they fed Jesus some food or gave him a drink or welcomed him as a stranger or clothed him when he was cold or visited him when he was sick or went to him in prison. None of us here has actually done that to Jesus for we weren't alive when He was on earth.

So Jesus clarifies it for them. Verse 40 – "And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it to me.'" So somehow Jesus equates offering ministries of mercy is done to Him to whoever is the least of Jesus' brothers and sisters. Based on that, He admits those on His right into the kingdom prepared since the foundation of the world.

So how does this sit with you? Now is this passage saying that you don't actually need faith to be admitted to the kingdom? Is Jesus saying that admittance depends on our deeds of mercy? Are people correct who have concluded that you don't need to be part of a church or believe in some doctrine? It's just a matter of being a good person and showing kindness to those in need. Then Jesus will accept us. But is this a right conclusion?

Where does the power and motivation come from to engage in a ministry of mercy from a right heart? Because people can't engage in social Justice out of an activist heart or a propound heart. People are naturally selfish. We don't have to practice being selfish. It comes naturally through our sinful nature. But when a person comes to Christ, Jesus begins to transform our hearts. He gives us our new identity – sons and daughters of God. The more we embrace this new identity and cooperate with the Spirit's work in our hearts, the more we will begin to act like Jesus.

What did Jesus do? He fed 5000 in a desolate place. He gave the water of eternal life to the woman at the well. He is a stranger loving God who went to the lost and marginalized and welcoming them. He's been clothing the naked ever since Adam and Eve needed clothes in the garden. He devoted much of his ministry to the sick during his time on earth. He released many from prison – maybe not actual prisons – but the prisons of demon possession and spiritual blindness.

So when His people engage in similar acts with little or no thought that "this is going to get me into heaven," they demonstrate a heart and life turned over to God. The ESV study bible puts it like this: *The righteous will inherit the*

kingdom not because of the compassionate works that they have done but because their righteousness comes from their transformed hearts in response to Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom, that resulted in compassion for the "least of these." Craig Blomberg writes "Jesus does not teach that everyone, irrespective of their faith commitments, who performs such works, is saved, but that everyone who is saved through allegiance to him performs such works.

So it is a fair criticism of churches and Christians in the past where the only concern was whether or not a person prayed the right prayer or made a decision for Christ. That approach could lead to the "Gap" I like to talk about in our discipleship journey. Someone makes a decision for Christ but their life shows no evidence of this decision. Jesus words here point to the importance a heart of mercy motivated by a heart transformed by Christ.

SLIDE 4 - So here is Lesson 2 - Those who have demonstrated true allegiance to Jesus through deeds of mercy, especially to fellow Christians, will live with him eternally in unending bliss.

And if the passage ended there, we could all go home happy and content that everyone has blessed inheritance to look forward to. But there are still the people on Jesus' left to deal with. Verse 41 – "Then he will say to those on his left, "Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels." There is no second chance. Jesus does not say, "You know everyone, I'm disappointed that you didn't follow me during your lives. But I wanted to give those that did first dibs on the best places in the kingdom. After they're done, you're welcome also!"

No. Depart from me. Cursed are you. There has been a place prepared as well. But it was not for people. It was prepared for the devil and the angels. But those on Jesus' left will be going there. Why? They failed to engage in the 6 merciful acts towards Him. This crowd is also surprised. If they had seen Jesus hungry, thirsty, a stranger, under-clothed, sick or in prison, they would have responded. They didn't have opportunity. Can't you hear or feel the indignation in their question? But Jesus answers "Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me." Jesus doesn't single out the really bad sins as the reason for His verdict. He doesn't say "well you're murderers and tyrants and scandal plagued and robbers and the scum of society." He pronounces a verdict because of sins of omission.

They failed to show merciful concern for the least of His brothers and sisters. So it is possible to live a comfortable North American existence – where a person is a generally good citizen who pays taxes and returns their library books on time and contributes to society through their work but is primarily focused on themselves and their family. But they never fed the hungry; gave water to the thirsty; welcomed the stranger; clothed the naked; visited the sick or those in prison.

Yet this neglect will be enough to damn them. **SLIDE 5 . Lesson 3 - Everyone else will live forever apart from God and all things good.**

I believe I would have been put with the goats on Jesus' left if He had returned about 30 years ago. My life showed no mercy but indifference toward the least of these. I needed a transformed heart. The only way my heart could be transformed from self-focused and indifferent to others focused and compassionate was for Christ to come in and change me. My life's trajectory was headed towards a comfortable job in downtown Calgary where I would earn a good living and indulge myself in all the good things that region had to offer – mountains; closeness to the US; wealth; network. I was set for a comfortable middle class existence that paid lip service to God but was mostly centered on myself. Then God intervened in my life and called me to ministry. Here I have been stretched, strained, pushed, pulled and backed into corners I didn't want to go into so that I would grow, change and open my eyes to the needs of the world around me. I still have a long way to go. But back then I judged those in need. I looked down on them and dismissed them as likely deserving of their fate. I would classically fit into the goat crowd. I think I would have stood among the goats on Judgment day. Yet because of Christ in my life and God's work, He moved me to a totally unexpected and different place in life that has now gone on for 30 years. If Christ had not died, then I wouldn't have the Holy Spirit who worked in my life to change my heart and life direction to one where I can now preach this message while still being challenged by it myself to grow more in this area.

This passage challenges me to think about how I am doing in each of these 6 areas? How are we doing as a church in each of these areas? Actually, there's quite a bit happening.

How are we feeding the hungry? We have a food bank and support the local food bank. Many of you have sponsor children which ensures they are receiving at least one good meal a day. How are we giving drink to the thirsty? Some support clean water initiatives or digging wells in villages that have no clean water supply. How are we at welcoming the Stranger on Sunday mornings? Do we just hang around with our friends or step out of that comfort zone and reach out to that person who stands alone? How are we at clothing the naked or the under clothed? Well the HART clothing drive brings clothes to people in need in Ukraine and other places in Eastern Europe. Some contribute to coats for kids at Christmas. Visiting the Sick? - We've got a whole list of shut-ins that need visits. Visiting those in prison? - We don't have

a prison ministry at this point – but maybe God will lead us there. There are many possibilities to exercise our faith if we only look around us.

Jesus concludes with the final judgment – verse 46. “And they (those on the left) will go away into eternal punishment but the righteous into eternal life.” I’ve addressed the question of eternal punishment and hell in previous messages in this series – Matthew 24:32-51 – FIND.

SLIDE – The Final Judgment

The final judgment is based on a heart that reveals mercy or indifference towards the least of Jesus’ brothers and sisters.

Some of you may not believe there is such a thing as a final judgment or life after death. If that describes you, then you’re not alone. An Angus-Reid survey done in December 2014 asked the question of Canadians – Is there life after death?

- Two-in-five (42%) say they believe life continues in some way after we die
- One-third (35%) say they aren’t sure
- One-quarter (23%) say there is no life after death

You may say you aren’t sure or you’re convinced there is no life after death. If that’s what you believe, I can’t argue you into the kingdom. But I would ask you to consider carefully your position. I would invite you to get to know this Jesus we’ve explored through the Gospel of Matthew. This Gospel was written to introduce a reader to Jesus. You can either read it yourself or go onto our website and listen to the messages that explain Matthew. After you do that, would you reconsider your position because I don’t want to see any of you separated to the left of Christ on Judgment Day.

Maybe God has revealed to you today that though you once made “a decision for Christ” or prayed a prayer, none of these acts of mercy show up in your life. Maybe it is time to look at your heart and see if you are really Christ’s. Does He have your heart? Does He receive your primary allegiance? Do you have little or no concern for the least of Jesus’ brothers and sisters? If not, you must first entrust your life to Him. This involves acknowledging your need for Him; your lostness; your own sins or wrongdoing. Then instead of trusting yourself and your own abilities to figure life out, you trust Christ – for forgiveness; for reconciliation with God; for new life and a new heart. From that new heart will begin to flow mercy and desire for others.

Many of you are already living this out because of Christ's heart changing work in you. To you I can say you have nothing to fear on Judgment Day. Jesus will separate you to his right and bring you to that kingdom prepared for you since the foundation of the world.

For we will face a judge who is pure, holy, and just. His judgement will be true and right. It will ultimately be a time of rejoicing over His justice. So I close today with Psalm 96:10-13: "Say among the nations, 'The Lord reigns! Yes, the world is established; it shall never be moved; he will judge the peoples with equity.' Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar, and all that fills it; let the field exult, and everything in it! Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy before the Lord, for he comes, for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness, and the peoples in his faithfulness."