THE GOSPEL READING
Matthew 25:31-46
[The Judgment of Works]

The Lord said, “When the Son of man comes in his glory and all the holy angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will place the sheep at his right hand, but the goats at the left.

Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; 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, I was 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, ‘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 welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.’

Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, 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.’ Then they also will answer, ‘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?’ Then he will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me.’ And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”
THE SERMON

In this passage, we read the last sermon the Lord gave before His crucifixion. Here, the Lord does not present a parable, but a description and a prophecy of the judgment that will come on the Last Day. The Cross is near, and Jesus brings us to contemplate His glory in the Second Coming when He will sit on the Judgment Seat with the whole world in front of Him. On that Day of Judgment, the world as we know it will come to an end, and the Day that never ends will dawn. It will be the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God, and those who have drawn near to God in faith and love will receive their inheritance.

This sermon from Christ teaches us that the Last Judgment will seal the destiny of all human beings, and we will be judged according to how we practiced the virtues of faith and love. To love God with all our heart, mind, and soul is to love our neighbor as ourselves. Such love is not merely felt — but shown through our actions. Similarly, genuine faith is that which works in and transforms our lives and the lives of others. Not merely our own, since faith is something to be shared. Genuine faith and acts of love are the measurements by which we will be judged.

The Lord tells us that at the Second Coming, He will come in His glory with all His angels, sit on His glorious throne, and all the nations will be gathered before Him. In His first coming, that is, His Incarnation, the Lord becoming flesh, not only restored our human nature to its original dignity but brought about a new possibility, to be transformed into the likeness of God. At His Second Coming in His eternal glory, He will come to separate the sheep from the goats. This illustration would have been familiar to Christ’s listeners, who were well-acquainted with livestock. Shepherds raised sheep and goats for various purposes. The Lord’s description teaches us that what made them different was not what they were but what they did and did not do. The sheep followed the Shepherd’s voice, as the Lord said: “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish” (John 10:27-28). They are gentle and productive. On the other hand, the goats did not follow the Shepherd but were disobedient. We are called to be obedient, like the sheep, not rebellious like the goats.

The Lord will say to those at His right hand, “Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; 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, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.” The Kingdom is an inheritance, a gift from God to those who love Him and their neighbor.
Notice how Christ identifies Himself with the poor, with those who are thirsty and hungry, with the sick, and with those in prison. To serve those in need is to serve Christ Himself. As He says, “ Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.” Some chose not to serve others in love, and those will be placed on His left hand, a gesture of His disfavor. Those who served others sacrificially will be placed on His right hand, a gesture of the Lord’s royal favor.

Those placed on Christ’s right imitated Him by faith and love, and they did so by feeding the hungry, practicing hospitality, clothing the poor, and visiting the sick and the captives. The needs listed include both physical and spiritual needs. In the Divine Liturgy, we are united in One Body, the Body of Christ. We pray for those in need, asking “for the sick, the suffering, the captives and for their salvation . . . for our deliverance from all affliction, wrath, danger, and distress.” Our mission is to participate in the fulfillment of this prayer, not only in thought and word but also in deed. We are called to go out to the world and practice genuine Christian love.

Serving the Lord by serving others in practical ways is a mark of Christian discipleship. After the Resurrection and before His Ascension, the Lord commanded, “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20). Becoming a disciple of Christ means being united with Him through baptism and living His commandments, and becoming a disciple who loves and serves God and others. Genuine service is best measured by acts towards those who are unable to repay us. The Lord sees the disposition of our hearts and knows whether we act out of faith and love, or out of a desire for recognition and reward.

Discipleship, therefore, is about imitating Christ and becoming a vessel of His grace and mercy to others. Those who live in this way and participate in the ministry of Christ are those who are welcomed into the Kingdom and who are called “blessed of the Father” in the end. If we love Him, we will follow in His steps. If our faith is grounded in Him and abides deeply in our souls, our Christian identity is shown to be living and life-giving.

By genuine faith and active love, we show mercy and compassion to all those in need. In this way, spiritually, we already begin to live in that Kingdom which we will receive as an inheritance on the Last Day, when “the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (Matthew 13:43), and the Lord will say, “Come inherit the Kingdom!” This is the manifestation of the grace and the love of God in our lives, as Saint John Chrysostom says: “Of what honor, of what blessedness are these words? And He said not, Take, but, Inherit, as one’s own, as your Father’s, as yours, as due to you from the first.”

We will begin to practice the kind of faith and love described as we make ourselves open and available to the grace of God and the work of the Holy Spirit, Who works in and through us (Philippians 2:13). Being His children, we receive the gifts of God, and He rewards our works with His eternal Kingdom. The love of God is the beginning and the end
of all things. We cooperate with His Spirit as His disciples; this is the way to the Kingdom of God. May we continue on this path in our journey to His Kingdom by serving Christ and others daily, so that we might be counted among the sheep at His right hand.