

**Sunday 8 March 2009 Sermon - King's Centre Christian Church, Sheffield, UK**

**Heaven 4: Jesus teaching on heaven**

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Intro

Brief recap:

- overriding theme is HOPE.
- Important to understand heaven & life after death – will affect the way we live today
- get the downloads/CDs & notes + study it in your Small Groups with notes provided.

If you are visiting us today – welcome – please bear in mind we're in the middle of a deep series on heaven, and don't take it the wrong way if today sounds quite forthright or even perhaps confusing. I'm doing my best simply to preach from the bible, and today from the words of Jesus, so without doubt there will be something of life you can take from the day.

Next couple of my sermons – heading towards new heaven/new earth. I'll be explaining more of the detail, what the bible suggests it will be like, in the future.

**Today – focus on Jesus' teaching about the end of this present world, the judgement of our lives that follows, and the idea of 'reward' being part of our inheritance beyond this life.**

You may not realise but Jesus said quite a lot about the life-after-death, and about the inheritance which his followers will gain from God. If you want to read the most about Jesus' teaching on the end-times, and the afterlife, then read the last few chapters of Matthew, particularly Ch 23, 24 & 25.

Many of Jesus' parables speak of the Kingdom of Heaven – they often start with “the kingdom of heaven is like...”

Explaining how we can live the heavenly-life, the Godly-kind-of-life NOW. Others address the big picture of how the nation of Israel fits into God's plan of salvation for the earth – because his audience was mostly Jews. For example, the Vineyard parables, the master and his servant, the banquet and the 10 virgins.

It is worth starting to build up the picture of the new heavens/earth by looking first at Jesus' teaching. There is more info elsewhere in the bible, but Jesus knew better than anyone what the reality is, so it's worth taking note!

Jesus' own words help create the picture of heaven, hell and life after death

First – briefly show you that Jesus' teaching backs up a number of the key points we've made over past 3 sermons about heaven, hell and what happens when I die.

- We looked together 2 weeks ago at how Jesus' words imply the idea of an 'intermediate' heaven.
  - That the present heaven, the 'paradise' Jesus speaks of at his crucifixion, is where believers in Jesus find rest and peace in God's presence after death.

- Access to the heavenly life with God is not through what you do – its based on whether or not you believe in Jesus while alive here on earth.
- But this paradise is not a permanent, spiritual place, because it will one day be joined with a new earth.
- Jesus does speak of a time of holy judgement for the earth and its inhabitants, past and present. (e.g. Matt 12:26).
  - This judgement is brought about by the end of the present era of history that we live in, when Jesus returns to this earth (eg. Matt 24) – ultimately, of course, in order to renew it.
  - The second coming of Jesus and the final judgement.
  - Mistake = Christians think “the whole point of the Christian faith is to follow Jesus away from earth to heaven and stay there for ever.” (Wright p128)
- Jesus does speak of hell as a real situation, and possible destination for some
  - The opposite of entering life, and the kingdom of God (Mark 9:42-48)
  - An eternal place (or perhaps condition) intended for the devil and his angels Matt 25:41 (just as John’s vision of Revelation also says)
  - The ultimate destination & implication for (?the condition of) sin which is not atoned for (Mark 9:47) [rather than each sin act itself – in which case Christians would go to hell too]
    - Of course the Trinity spilt blood to open atonement – a clean slate - for as many as will accept it
  - Pictures Hell several times as the ‘eternal fire’ (Matt 18:8; Matt 25:41) or a ‘furnace of fire’ (Matt 13:42) - which is also repeated in Revelation. And uses the example of the rubbish dump outside the city of Jerusalem called ‘gehenna’ which was continually smouldering with fire, and a pretty nasty place to find yourself.
  - And his description of the effect of hell is broadly as being a separation from God (Matt 25:41) “depart from me” the goats are told.
    - “To be forsaken for ever by God; to have our decision to be free of him permanently confirmed: that is hell” (Milne p.126)
- DON’T GET TOO DEPRESSED – the point is, the invitation and the way to peace with God, and eternal future in His presence and perfection – is always open, as long as you’re alive
  - That’s Jesus’ whole purpose in coming to earth, dying and rising again.
- In fact, although it might surprise you to hear how much detail Jesus gives about hell [and he should know, He’s the only one to have experienced it fully and survived], I’d say that Jesus’ primary focus was to try to get humankind to understand and jump 2-feet into the truth that we can actually see heaven invade earth in our daily lives NOW!
  - Its ‘life before death’ as well as afterwards

### Jesus on the final judgement and rewards in heaven

Looking forwards – let’s see what glimpses and hope Jesus gives of the future life

Reading: Matt 25:31-46 (Sheep & Goats) [also Matthew 25:14-30]

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. "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.' "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' "The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'

"Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire 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, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.' "They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?' "He 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.' "Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."

#### Not a guilt-inducer, but a passage of hope and inspiration

First – I'm not repeating this teaching of Jesus to make you scared or feel guilty. The truth is that if you have faith in Jesus, you will be judged by Jesus as OK – as righteous – and you will share an overwhelmingly wonderful eternal life in the presence and worship of God. In other words, you get to be a sheep! Jesus is quite clear – the goats thing is for those who, again and again, refuse to acknowledge Jesus and put their faith in him in life, despite all the signs, opportunities and creation in the world shouting the opposite. That's why in KC we always seek to share the good news about Jesus to anyone who will listen – because it really matters!

The main points that Jesus is making are that there will be a final judgement before our creator and king, and that for those who are judged worthy, there are rewards stored up in our heavenly future life.

#### Unpacking the passage:

Shepherds in those days would have grazed their sheep & goats together, and then separated them for the night time, to protect the less hardy sheep in a shelter against the cold nights. Just like Bedouin shepherds still do today.

(v31-33) The simple truth is that one day, and only the Father knows when, Jesus will return to his earth in the full glory of God and heaven (which is God's realm), and he will gather all his human creation before him. There will be a final divine judgement (v31-32)

- The 'king' mentioned is Jesus himself, who spoke these words – and who was shortly to come into his fullest inheritance through his death – so in Matt 28

after his resurrection he says “all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Matt 28:18)

- The Son of Man, Jesus, comes TO EARTH in all his glory
- Accompanied by other heavenly beings the angels (v31)
- Seated on his throne (v31)
- ‘all nations’ are gathered in his presence (v32)
- Mirrored by a passage in Rev 20:11-15, where the dead are resurrected then judged

### (v34 & 41)

Then Jesus will pass a correct judgement, a judgement which is fully just and wholesome. Not biased and with no evil intent, because God is pure and holy.

Those who he judges as worthy are invited to come, and they are blessed by the Father (v.34), and they come into an inheritance which is timeless. Those who are not judged as worthy also reap a consequence which is eternal, and is essentially separation from God’s presence and all its blessing.

And Jesus explains that this judgement is based not only on your faith in Jesus, which secures you life eternal, he also explains that the future rewards and blessings which will be yours are also given to you in accordance with your actions on earth during your lifetime.

SO – the final judgement is a major aspect of Christian belief. It may not sound hugely politically correct and inclusive in the modern climate, but it is a central feature of the New Testament and Jesus’ teaching – so we need to understand it.

Bruce Milne – “Jesus Christ, incarnate God, taught with great frequency and unwavering solemnity the fact of a future divine judgement awaiting every person. If we do not share this belief, we set ourselves up as greater authorities on the spiritual life and post-mortem existence than Jesus, to say nothing of the vast multitudes of his followers through the ages who have embraced this belief with impressive consistency.” (Milne p.121)

### (v.35-46)

**A long time before we stand before God for final just judgement, Jesus is saying that we meet God on earth first. God is to be found in the everyday, in the needy brothers/sisters of Jesus and perhaps most of all in the ‘least’ of those people. God is to be found and worshipped in *all that we do* which is in line with His will, and his kingdom. Every kind word, every act of grace, every act of mercy mirrors God.**

**And He’s here, with us now, as we meet together.**

- God’s realm isn’t just in some distant cloud-land in outer space, its on earth too, amongst his people and his creation.
  - God’s realm is heaven, and this is God’s earth, and he wants his realm, his kingdom, extended on earth. ‘Your Kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven’
  - **‘above, and beyond, and ever so close’**

- SO – our lives following Jesus, obeying his commandments, of love and service to others, begins the life of heaven NOW, on earth.
- What Jesus expands in this passage is that, to quote Gladiator Maximus again, “what we do in life echoes in eternity”

Jesus teaches us all to sow seeds of our eternal nature NOW.

“what we do in life echoes in eternity”. The judgement to come isn’t arbitrary, it’s not based just on how Jesus feels that day, but on the encounters of our present, every-day lives, (as well as our faith). The way we respond (or don’t respond – omission) to the issues and opportunities of life, including the hardship and suffering of others, is ‘judged’ or seen by God. All the time – like, now. Like Zimbabwe now, like buying Fair Trade now, like loving your neighbour now. The final judgement just brings it all together.

### Salvation is still a gift

I’m not suggesting that if you are a disciple of Jesus but you make some poor decisions in life, then in the end, you’ll end up in hell after all. Salvation is a free gift from God, once you’ve accepted Jesus your destination is secure, but the issue of what you might call ‘quality of life’ seems to matter in the New Testament.

- We going to rule as co-heirs with Christ (Rom 8:16-17) but some will rule more than others, because of their faith and actions on earth.
- I would rather be storing up treasures in heaven all my life, than sit back on my salvation ticket, put it in the bank for a little interest, and cash it in at the end
  - That’s bar-code Christianity – pray this prayer and you’re saved
  - I want 3-dimensional, quantum physics, ever-expanding light the touch-paper and watch it explode Christianity!
  - We’re invited and called into life in all its fullness, in the now, in the expectation of the reward of a tremendous inheritance in the heavenly life which can’t perish or fade, and is even now being stored up for us – partly as a result of our own actions and faith.
  - That’s what I want!

But – take heed! Jesus is very clear on the 2 destinations available. And He should know, He is the author of life, and the One through whom the world was created (Gen 1, 1 John 1).

- There is no third option
- Each of us in this room, every person in Sheffield this morning, is currently heading towards one destination or the other, we are either travellers towards heaven or hell.
- The destiny assigned to each human in front of the judgement seat of Christ is not open to appeal, basically because it will be utterly just. The consequences of the final judgement are not alterable.
- There is no avoiding the truth of Jesus, but there is always the freedom to accept Him or reject Him.
  - There is time to get on the right path today

### Rewards

So finally and briefly, what about this notion of rewards? Paul Maconochie has helpfully taught here a couple of times since Christmas about inheritance and our apprenticeship of our Father and his kingdom on earth, as preparation for lives of great reward and inheritance with Jesus after we die.

Some people struggle with the idea of heavenly rewards – maybe they feel that’s a bit presumptuous, or they feel too humble to think they’re worth it.

There is no need to be bashful about the idea of rewards from God. **At their root, they are not rewards for something you’ve earned.** Like a parent bribing a child to be good, and giving them a sweet in return.

God’s rewards are gifts to us, in the same way that an inheritance is a gift

- Salvation is a free gift, you can’t earn it, you can’t buy or work your way into eternal life with God.
- Nevertheless – the theme of inheritance/heirs etc is all through the New Testament
  - To be enjoyed **after** Jesus returns, **after** God renews all things. The rewards kick in on the new earth, joined with the new heaven.
  - Who knows what that might look like? Paul threw in the idea last week of helping Christ create new galaxies, maybe we’ll rule over new cities or new rainforests... who knows?
- **So the ‘reward’ is in fact an inheritance.** An ‘inheritance’ is something we benefit from based on someone else’s giving, not something we’ve obtained by personal merit. You don’t inherit your Father’s house because you deserve it, you inherit because he gives it to you, rather than someone else.
  - Our Father loves to give good gifts
- Even so, rewards appear to be in relation to the price we paid to follow Jesus. Other parables which I’m not unpacking today suggest that the rewards mirror the amount you put in (10, 5, 2 times your investment).
  - In Revelation it shows those Christians who were martyred, killed, for their faith, having a greater reward than some others. They paid the ultimate price to follow Jesus into eternity, and they gain a reward, an inheritance, to match.

### Our motivation for rewards

So what is our motivation?

In this passage, the sheep who are by grace given eternal life in God are actually very surprised to get their inheritance by Jesus’ criteria of doing good to others. They say “when...when...when?”

- Jesus makes it clear that they haven’t been judged favourably because of their calculating efforts to do good. ‘I’ll help this old lady across the road so I get reward in heaven’
- **God is looking for an authentic expression of love in action. We love, because he first loved us.** (1 John 4:19)
  - **The kingdom of heaven is above, and beyond and ever so close**
- The driving force for our good works, is our faith.
  - If you don’t believe it’s worth it, you won’t do it.

- If you haven't yet experienced the overwhelming power of God's love for you, you won't have enough love inside you to serve others without agenda.
- If you're not yet sure of your identity in God, as a much loved child of a good father, then you may not have enough inner-security to seek first the kingdom without minding what other people think of you
- **The motivation to 'do good' in our world is not to be for our personal benefit**, it's to be a natural expression, an overflow from our hearts, in grateful thanks for the love, acceptance, forgiveness, grace, joy, peace, new life, new hope, new future, which is ours through Christ Jesus!

### Response

- Call to become Christian
- build up treasures in heaven
  - remember your identity and hope – our defining vision is not self-serving, but the wondering future of heaven ahead of us
  - don't strive – act out of grace & Holy Spirit empowering – but do act!
- where can you find and serve God in the present? And so, build up your heavenly treasures?
- Do you need a kingdom breakthrough today?
  - The kingdom of heaven is above, and beyond and ever so close
  - Some of the rewards of heaven can be yours and other people's now – that's why we push in for the kingdom to come.
  - The kingdom comes against the conditions of this world
    - Sin, sickness, sadness
    - Demons, death, depression
  - It brings into our, & others', daily lives...
    - Healing, peace, joy, worship, encountering the presence of God,
    - justice, hope, life, love...