

Ascended and Coming to Judge

[Matthew 25:31-46](#)

The Apostles' Creed

Dr. Thomas A. Erickson

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"He ascended into heaven," says our Creed. "From thence he shall come." That language echoes the first chapter of The Acts of the Apostles, "This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." (Acts 1:11)

Because of the ascension, Jesus occupies a position of authority infinitely more powerful than the Supreme Court, the Congress of the United States, the Oval Office, and every other seat of authority on planet earth. You see, Jesus is no less present in the world today than when he stood on a Galilean hillside delivering the Sermon on the Mount. The ascension means that what Jesus once did locally he now does globally. Where once his message went only as far as his own voice could carry and only to those who could understand Aramaic, it is now going to the whole world through witnesses who preach and teach in thousands of languages and dialects. Where once Jesus had only five loaves and two fish to feed the multitudes, he now has One Great Hour of Sharing, Food for the Hungry, the Red Cross, and many other relief agencies to respond to crises as soon as they occur, anywhere on planet earth. Where once Jesus could heal only those who were within reach of his own arms, he is now healing millions through the skill of doctors, nurses, counselors, and ordinary people around the globe.

Again, our Lord's ascension is not so much a departing as it is a disappearing. We cannot see or touch him, but he is present with us every moment of every day by the ministry of his Spirit. During the Second World War my father was too old to join the army, but not too old to join the war effort. So when Henry J. Kaiser built his huge shipyards in Oakland, my dad took a train north and went to work on the graveyard shift. He was away from home for over a year, yet his presence was always with us. He wrote us every Friday because that was pay day, and his letter always contained a money order to keep the family going down south in Santa Barbara. And, of course, we often phoned to keep in touch personally.

We cannot see Jesus, but we have his letters, neatly bound in the Bible, for our guidance and comfort. And we may keep in touch regularly through prayer. Jesus has not abandoned the world. On the contrary, he's got the whole world in his hands, precisely because he has ascended to the right hand of God the Father Almighty. And the line is never busy, nor will you ever be put on hold when you phone home.

Someday, the phone-prayer will no longer be necessary. For with Christians throughout the ages we also confess, "From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead." That's welcome news because it means that this old, broken, sinful, and weary world will someday be set right. Jesus, in his Revelation to John, promised a new heaven and a new earth, and that new earth will be free of war, cleansed of cancer, purged of pain and hunger and racism and every other "ism" that triggers hatred and spawns persecution. Something deep within us says that children should not have to go to bed hungry, but they do. Loved ones should not contract heart disease, but they do. Innocent citizens should not be caught in the crossfire of war and terrorist bombings, but they are. When we say, "From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead," we are stating our belief that every wrongful injury, every unjust hardship, every unfair setback, every undeserved illness is known to our loving Savior and will someday be set right.

But I wonder, do the words, "to judge the quick and the dead," give you pause? They might be the scariest words in the Creed were it not that Jesus has already taken our judgment upon himself at the cross. Let Paul's assurance in Romans 8 soak into your soul: "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." (Romans 8:1) No condemnation! Christ has cancelled every verdict that might otherwise be lodged against us. Yes, but doesn't the text read earlier in today's service imply that we will one day be judged on whether or not we have fed the hungry, clothed the naked, welcomed the stranger, cared for the sick, and visited prisoners? And don't all those actions suggest that our ultimate salvation depends on the work we do for others? Was the Apostle Paul wrong when he wrote, "By grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast"? (Ephesians 2:8-9) And did Luther, Calvin, and the other Reformers lead us down a primrose pathway when they insisted that salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, and not by the works we do, however loving? How shall we resolve this apparent contradiction?

Note that the good works cited in Matthew 25 are done not merely to the poor and the destitute, for Jesus says, "Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." Jesus identifies so closely with the world's neglected people that he is the true recipient of these loving acts. And Jesus is none other than our Savior, the one who dies for our sins and rises for our justification. If, therefore, we believe in Jesus we will feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and welcome the stranger. Conversely, if we are not feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and welcoming the stranger, it may mean that our faith is hollow, that something or someone other than Jesus is our god and savior. So Matthew 25 is a wake-up call. Do you believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son our Lord? Then you will see and serve Jesus in the least of these who are members of his family, the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the prisoner.

And we can help you do that. Feed the hungry through the prayer breakfasts at Third Street Church of God. Care for the homeless by serving with the Capital Interfaith Hospitality Network. Minister to prisoners by supporting Partners with the Persecuted Church. Join a short term mission trip to take medical care to the poor in the Dominican Republic. Keep giving to provide relief supplies for Iraq. In that regard, allow me to thank you for giving over \$32,000 to the recent One Great Hour of Sharing offering. That will buy a lot of food, medicine, tents, and tools for a lot of innocent, suffering people. And because the suffering is not over, neither is our giving.

Earlier in life I spent years earning a B.A., two masters, and a doctoral degree, assuming that those diplomas would serve as my passport to successful ministry. But when a deacon introduced me to his parish group a few weeks ago, he didn't say a word about my academic background. He had learned that Carol and I had once served an inner city church in Los Angeles, and he asked that I tell the group about our ministry to Hispanic immigrants and to gang kids back in the sixties. That night, that group could care less about my degrees; it was service to people in the name of Christ they were interested in.

When our Lord comes to judge the quick and the dead, he will not ask for our resumes with their academic achievements and professional honors. He will ask, rather, whether or not our faith in him is valid, and the validation stamp will read, "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me."

Put that stamp on your life, and Jesus will one day say to you, "Come, you that are blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."