

**SUNDAY OF THE LAST JUDGMENT**  
**Matt. 25:31-46**

**By Archpriest Peter Olsen**  
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The new and final covenant that God made with man is outlined in the Sermon on the Mount, which can be found in chapters 5-7 of the Gospel of St. Matthew. The sermon begins with the Beatitudes and continues with exhortations to righteousness: "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." The Lord then goes on to re-iterate specific commandments of the old covenant and increases their intensity in the new covenant. Not to kill has been expanded to not get angry. Not to commit adultery is escalated to not look at a woman with lust. The requirement to provide a certificate when getting a divorce has now reached the expectation of marriage as a lifetime commitment. Not to swear falsely has been changed to not swear at all. The famous commandment which has become an often quoted adage, "an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth" has been transformed into the injunction that we should turn the other cheek. Loving our neighbor alone is no longer sufficient. Now we are told that we should love our enemies as well. The Lord goes on to speak about many other topics, such as pride, almsgiving, fasting, being anxious, judging others, self-deception, and prayer.

A superficial and incorrect understanding of Christianity can lead a person to become discouraged or even lose faith altogether by what at face value may seem to be unrealistic and impossible expectations. The Russian atheist-socialist literary critic of the XIX century, Vissarion Belinsky, is quoted as saying, "Do you know that man's sins cannot be counted against him and that he cannot be laden down with obligations and with turning the other cheek when society is set up in such a mean fashion that a man cannot help but do wrong; economic factors alone lead him to do wrong, and it is absurd and cruel to demand from a man something which the very laws of nature make it impossible for him to carry out, even if he wanted to." Belinsky was too arrogant and uncaring to know that there were saints in his own day who proved him wrong. Fyodor Dostoevsky, Belinsky's contemporary, visited with St. Amvrosy, the clairvoyant elder of the famous Russian monastery Optina Pustyn. It was Amvrosy who Dostoevsky used as the prototype for his character the Elder Zosima in his novel "The Brothers Karamazov."

Misunderstanding Christianity has led some people to believe, for centuries, that the Last Judgment is going to be a horrible and terrifying experience where an implacable and inexorable Judge will send sinners into a fire of the damned, where they will be eternally tortured and punished for their sins. This mythology couldn't be further from the truth. The good news of the Gospel is that God is love. He Himself became a Man and died on the Cross for the sake of saving people. It is the face of the love of God, the love of Christ and the love of the cross that we will encounter at the Last Judgment, and not pitchforks and instruments of torture. The Lord said, "The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son" (John 5:22). Jesus goes on to say, "I did not come to judge the world but to save the world" (John 12:47). If neither the Father nor the Son will judge us, then who will judge us? The answer is given in today's Gospel.

The description of the Last Judgment which we heard today is centered on how we treat our neighbor. It is like having an upcoming examination and we are told ahead of time what the questions on the test will be. Did you feed the hungry, did you clothe the naked, did you give shelter to the homeless, did you give alms to the poor, did you visit those in prisons and in hospitals? The Lord makes the profound statement that "If you did this to these the least of my brethren, then you did it to me, and if you did it not to these the least of these my brethren, then you did it not to me" (Matthew 25:40,45). So what happened to all of those commandments that the Lord gave us in the Sermon on the Mount? Are they optional? Of course not. We tend to think of ourselves as individuals, as if we were some kind of island unto

ourselves. This attitude is one pitfall in our spiritual struggles which sometimes leads people to say, "I don't need to go to church to be spiritual or to be a Christian." People who think this way couldn't be more mistaken. We can be saved with other people, but we are damned alone. But what about the hermits or solitary saints, such as Mary of Egypt? Their sanctity was forged in fire by first learning obedience and humility and by enduring a lifetime of unbearable sufferings. They never separated themselves from receiving Holy Communion, and their love for humanity was expressed in the river of tears and in countless prayers that they offered for the world. They not only equaled but far surpassed the kindness and love offered by those who live in society. Each of us gives to others in his or her own way and according to one's ability and talents.

All human beings are social creatures by nature. You and I live in a community, we live among other people who Jesus refers to as "our neighbors." We tend to forget that life consists of numerous relationships and interactions with the people around us. Achieving the ideal goals of virtue as outlined in the new covenant actually becomes attainable only when we connect our spiritual struggles with the love, kindness, beneficence and generosity we bestow upon our neighbors, whoever and wherever they may be. In fact, you may say that when we have an opportunity to help someone in some way, it is Christ Himself standing in front of us on Judgment Day *right here and now*. If we selfishly and coldly refuse our love and help to our neighbor, then it is that person in the face of Christ who will cast us into the outer darkness. If, however, we choose instead to reach out a helping hand of love and generosity, then from that person Christ will speak to us and say "Come, O blessed of my Father inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" (Matt. 25:34). Amen.

