

The Judgment of the Nations
Matthew 25:31-46
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Jesus concluded the Olivet Discourse with a description of coming judgment, when He comes again at the end of the age. Several times in this final teaching of Jesus to His disciples He had referred to the coming judgment (24:39-41, 50-51; 25:11-12, 29-30). Likewise, Matthew's Gospel included information about the coming judgment many times before this discourse (cf. Matthew 3:12; 6:2, 5, 16; 7:24-27; 13:30, 48-49; 18:23-34; 20:1-16; 21:33-41; 22:1-14). Now He gives a fuller description of what this judgment will be.

This passage is sometimes referred to as the parable of the sheep and the goats. However, it is not actually a parable, since while it uses imagery of sheep and goats to refer to believers and unbelievers, it is rather a description of an actual future event. Parables teach a spiritual principle by using a story based in reality. This judgment is not a story, it is a prophetic description of the future judgment.

This judgment should not be confused with the final judgment taught in Revelation 20:11-15. This judgment involves those alive at the coming of Christ, while the final judgment is of the dead after Christ has come to reign over the kingdom for 1,000 years (Revelation 20:1-10). This judgment at the end of the tribulation period upon all the people on earth alive at that time, when *"All the nations will be gathered before Him"* and some are taken away into judgment and others are left to enter the kingdom (Matthew 24:36-41).

The collection of the nations (25:31-33)

The opening setting of this judgment corresponds to Jesus' words from Matthew 24:29-31, in which He first described His second coming, where *"all the tribes of the earth"* would see *"the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory."* In His coming *"He will send forth His angels"* where they will *"gather together the elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other"* (24:31).

Since this coming will be *"immediately after the tribulation of those days"* (24:29), then this collection of the nations will occur also immediately after the tribulation. *"He will sit on His glorious throne,"* which Jesus first revealed in Matthew 19:28. This throne signals His authority to judge the nations.

This throne is the fulfillment of the promise of the Davidic covenant, that the Messiah would be a descendant of David who will reign upon a throne over an eternal kingdom. *“I will raise up your descendant after you, who will come forth from you, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever”* (2 Samuel 7:12-13). This promise was applied prophetically to Jesus by the angel who appeared to His mother, Mary, in Luke 1:31-33, *“And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end.”* So this throne is synonymous with the establishment of God’s kingdom.

The normal use of the phrase *“the nations”* in the New Testament is in reference to the Gentiles. This has led some to conclude that the judgment only involves those who are not Jews. However, since His return is on the Mount of Olives (cf. Zechariah 14:4), He is gathering the nations to Judea. Also, as only some of the Jews will be followers of Jesus, it follows that those entering the kingdom will be Jews and Gentiles and those entering eternal destruction will also include Jews and Gentiles. Therefore, Jews will be included in this gathering, which is consistent with the usage of *“nations”* in some passages to include Jews also (Matthew 28:18-20; Romans 16:26; Revelation 15:4).

Also, the gathering of the nations and the separation of the sheep and goats is a significant problem for those who believe in a post-tribulational rapture. If the rapture of the church (1 Thessalonians 4:16-18; 1 Corinthians 15:51-52) occurs after the tribulation period, then where do the sheep come from in this gathering? Since the seven-year period of distress follows the rapture, the tribulation era is where the sheep of Matthew 25:32 are converted (cf. Revelation 7:9, 14).

Shepherding in the land of Israel often included both sheep and goats. *“As for you, My flock, thus says the Lord GOD, ‘Behold, I will judge between one sheep and another, between the rams and the male goats’”* (Ezekiel 34:17). Sheep and goats were commonly separated due to the aggressiveness of goats. This explains the reason for Christ using this imagery.

These sheep and goats that are gathered are those who are alive at the end of the tribulation age, when Christ returns. They are not people who are resurrected for this judgment since they are gathered from *“the four winds”* of earth (24:31). The sheep are those who enter into the kingdom in their natural bodies (24:40-41).

The commendation of the believers (25:34-40)

Jesus changed His title from *“the Son of Man”* (25:31) to *“the King”* (25: 34, 40). This is consistent with the establishment of the kingdom of God, with the Son of Man sitting on *“His glorious throne.”* It also points the reader back to Daniel 7:13-14, where the Son of Man will receive a kingdom. The reason it is a kingdom is because it is ruled by the King.

The King will first address those whom He has placed on His right, which is a favored place of honor. His words, *“Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world,”* are packed with meaning.

1. The sheep are *“blessed.”* This is not the word *“blessed”* from Matthew 5:3-12 but rather the word *“blessed”* as in *“Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!”* (Matthew 21:9; 23:39). They are blessed because of their glorious participation in the kingdom.
2. The sheep *“inherit the kingdom.”* Inheritance comes from a relationship with the one from whom you inherit something. In this case, the Father grants the sheep the inheritance of the kingdom as His children.
3. The sheep inherit what was prepared *“from the foundation of the world.”* This was the Father’s plan since the creation (John 17:24; Ephesians 1:4; 1 Peter 1:20).
4. The sheep are told to *“come”* to inherit *“the kingdom.”* This speaks to their entrance into the kingdom that has been prepared on earth, ruled by the King from His throne in Jerusalem, just as was prophesied repeatedly by the prophets of the Old Testament.

The statement about their place in the kingdom being prepared for them *“from the foundation of the world”* is significant in light of Jesus’ description of what the sheep did. *“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; naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.”* Therefore, these good deeds by the sheep were prepared *“from the foundation of the world.”* The inheritance of the kingdom was based upon what the Father had prepared, not based upon the deeds that had been done. The sheep enter the kingdom because they are blessed to do so, not because they have performed these good deeds. The works they did were the result of the Father’s blessing of them. Their true faith was demonstrated by their actions in service to Jesus.

Each of the six types of deeds these believers performed were unknown to them (25:37-39). They surely knew something of what they had done, but were completely unaware of who they were actually serving. This obviously meant that when they served others in the ways that Jesus described, they were serving the King Himself. Jesus told them this directly in Matthew 25:40, *“Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.”*

The phrase *“brothers of Mine”* speaks to those who had been served as hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick and in prison, as being those who had believed in Jesus. This fits with the time of tribulation on earth, where *“there will be a great tribulation, such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever will. Unless those days had been cut short, no life would have been saved”* (Matthew 24:21-22).

During these seven years prior to the Lord’s return there will be *“famines and earthquakes”* (24:7). This will result in there being people who are hungry and thirsty. Luke 21:11 adds, *“and there will be great earthquakes, and in various places plagues and famines; and there will be terrors.”* These plagues and terrors will lead to people who are sick, naked and displaced.

The followers of Jesus would uniquely suffer as at least some of those who believe in Jesus will be incarcerated in the tribulation period. Jesus told them, *“Then they will deliver you to tribulation, and will kill you, and you will be hated by all nations because of My name”* (Matthew 24:9).

Many see a distinction between *“one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them”* and *“the sheep.”* This then sees the brothers of Jesus in verse 40 as referring to all those in need, not just the disciples. However, there is no reason to view these brothers of Jesus as anything other than the true disciples of Jesus. This is clear from Matthew 12:48-49, *“Jesus answered the one who was telling Him and said, ‘Who is My mother and who are My brothers?’ And stretching out His hand toward His disciples, He said, ‘Behold My mother and My brothers!’”* (cf. Matthew 23:8; 28:10).

Therefore, how the disciples treat their fellow disciples will demonstrate their true faith. Those disciples whom Jesus calls *“the least of them”* most likely, in the context of the preceding parable of the talents, refers to those who have been given less abilities with which to serve the Lord. They are just as needy, but will not be respected since the world will consider them to have less utility value.

The condemnation of the unbelievers (25:41-45)

While the kingdom of heaven is for the sheep, and was prepared for them *“from the foundation of the world”*, the goats are banished from the presence of God and sent *“into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels.”* These *“accursed ones”* are the unbelievers gathered from the whole world. Notice that the sheep inherit the kingdom *“prepared for you”* while the goats are sent into the eternal fire *“which has been prepared for the devil and his angels.”* In other words, it is only the sheep who are described as predestined. The kingdom was prepared for them, while the eternal fire was prepared for the devil and his angels.

This basis of their judgment was in direct contrast to the inheritance of the sheep, namely, how they treated the least of the disciples of Jesus. Their unbelief moved them to do nothing to help those who suffered in the name of Jesus. The fact that they address Him as *“Lord”* (25:44) has nothing to do with any faith on their part but it is indicative of all people who are confronted by their Judge. *“At the name of JESUS EVERY KNEE WILL BOW, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father”* (Philippians 2:10-11).

Like the sheep, they had no idea that helping the least of the brothers of Jesus was indeed serving the Lord Himself. Their condemnation was not on this unawareness, but on their sin of failing to serve Jesus by failing to help the least of these with their basic needs of food, drink, clothing, relationship, health and freedom. Their judgment was not specifically about what they did, but what they failed to do. Their sin of omission was enough to demonstrate their unbelief and leave them accursed, destined for eternal destruction.

The ceaseless judgment (25:46)

This judgment upon the goats is the only time the phrase *“eternal punishment”* is used in the Bible. Because the same word *“eternal”* is used to describe both punishment and life in this verse, we can conclude that both the destiny of the saved and the destiny of the unsaved are eternal. This then opposes the false doctrine of the annihilation of the unsaved (cf. 2 Thessalonians 1:9).

While the righteous will enter eternal life in the kingdom of God, the wicked will go away to eternal punishment in Hades (cf. Luke 16:19-31), where all the unsaved exist until the final judgment at the end of the millennial kingdom where God will deliver them all into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:11-15).

Conclusion

While the judgment of the sheep and the goats is specific to those who are alive when Jesus returns, the importance of serving those whom Jesus loves is for all of His disciples throughout this present age. Many passages speak to this in the New Testament. *“If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen”* (1 John 4:20). It is impossible to overlook the importance of serving our fellow believers in Christ as we exercise our faith in Jesus Christ. *“By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another”* (John 13:35). We cannot truly love God without loving His children.

The needs of *“the least of these”* in the tribulation era were substantial. Yet whenever our fellow believers are in great need, we have a responsibility to respond to them to serve them, *“Our people must also learn to engage in good deeds to meet pressing needs, so that they will not be unfruitful”* (Titus 3:14). Indeed, we can’t help but want to help them, *“But whoever has the world’s goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him?”* (1 John 3:17). This love for God that moves us to help others in need gives evidence of our true faith.

That these two chapters in Matthew speak exclusively about end-times events emphasizes the importance of prophetic teaching. Simply because there are differences of opinion regarding the nature of the millennium and the rapture of the church should not discourage us from understanding the Scripture and gaining encouragement from it. The Lord has a purpose for His revelation and we ought not to be neglectful.

We ought to expect all prophecy to be fulfilled in the same way that we have seen prophecy be fulfilled in the past, that is, in the literal sense. Jesus will literally return again in the same way that He left the earth (cf. Acts 1:11). He will bring the kingdom of God to earth, where *“the kingdom of the world will become the kingdom of our Lord”* (Revelation 11:15), where He will reign with His followers on earth for 1,000 years (Revelation 5:10; 20:4-5). This is what we ought to pray for, *“Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven”* (Matthew 6:10). This will happen just as He promised *“And the LORD will be king over all the earth; in that day the LORD will be the only one, and His name the only one”* (Zechariah 14:9). Therefore, Matthew 24-25 is a fitting climax to the ministry of Christ in His first coming, where He teaches about final justice that is coming just as the narrative turns to the great injustice of His crucifixion.