

THE FINAL JUDGMENT

Matthew 25:31-46

THE KING ARRIVES

Matthew 25:31

31 “But when the Son of Man comes in His glory,
and all the angels with Him,
then He will sit on His glorious throne.
(**Matthew 25:31, 2022 LSB**)

We are all waiting for this moment: the Second Coming of Christ. Jesus will come again.

Hebrews 9:28 says He will appear a second time for salvation, without reference to sin, to those who eagerly await Him. That is, when Jesus returns, it will not be to die for sinners. He will not return in humility, emptying Himself of His glory. Isaiah 53:2-3 describes Him in His first advent as having “no stately form or majesty that we should look upon Him, nor appearance that we should desire Him” and as “a man despised and forsaken, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.”

Not in His second coming, though.

When Jesus returns, it will be in complete and utter glory, ready to put an end to all rebellion and inaugurate the eternal state. He will be accompanied by every angel in heaven, and, Revelation 19 says, by every resurrected saint.

He will take His glorious throne; that is, His throne of glory. He will not come to a manger as in His first advent. He will not come in the weakness and frailty of a newborn.

The worship language of Revelation 5 says that the Lord Jesus Christ is worthy of all power, glory, riches, wisdom, strength, honor, blessing, and might. (Revelation 5:11-14). When He comes again, He will display all of these to the fullest measure: all power, glory, riches, wisdom, strength, honor, blessing, and might.

SEPARATION

Matthew 25:32-33

Upon His return, Christ’s very first act will be to separate His people from the wicked.

32 “And all the nations will be gathered before Him;
and He will separate them from one another,
as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats;
33 and He will put the sheep on His right,
and the goats on the left.
(Matthew 25:32–33, 2022 LSB)

This passage is often called the parable of the sheep and the goats. It’s not a parable. Jesus uses a very brief metaphor to describe the separation of the righteous from the wicked. He never mentions sheep and goats again after this. This is not a parable but a description of final judgment.

Would you notice that Jesus will separate the sheep from the goats; that is, the righteous from the wicked, the elect from the reprobate, the children of God from the children of wrath?

The normal state of mankind is rebellion and sin. We are all children of wrath by natural birth (Ephesians 2:3). Condemnation is due to our nature of sin and our sinful actions. Condemnation requires no change in a person’s essential makeup. We are perfectly suited for judgment at the moment of conception. Unchanged humanity is condemned humanity. Jesus made this abundantly clear in John 3:18. God didn’t need to send Jesus into the world to condemn the world because the world was doomed already. It was, however, necessary for God to send Jesus into the world to save the world because salvation is not the natural state of mankind.

On the other hand, salvation requires the greatest transformation imaginable: the conversion of our true nature. Christians are only children of God by adoption through faith in Jesus (Ephesians 1:5). We must be born again by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Father had to elect us; the Son had to die for us; the Spirit must convert and transform us.

What does Second Corinthians 5:17 say?

17 Therefore if anyone is in Christ,
he is **a new creation**;
the old things passed away;
behold, new things have come.
(2 Corinthians 5:17, 2022 LSB)

When Yahweh finished His initial creation of all things, He pronounced it very good. Do you think that He thinks your new life in Christ is anything less than very good? Jesus is the Son in

whom He is well-pleased. We are dressed in the righteousness of Christ; we have been reborn in the image of the Lord Jesus. He is well-pleased with His work in us.

The Lord might go one by one through all humanity; what does time matter when all eternity stretches out before you? Or He might give an order to the holy angels to sift His people from those under His judgment. Or He might just speak a word and it will be so.

What He won't have to do is first determine who is who. He knows.

REWARD & PUNISHMENT

Matthew 25:34, 41

It would be helpful to look at Jesus' words to the righteous and the wicked side-by-side, beginning with reward and punishment.

Jesus **rewards** His people in Matthew 25:34:

34 “Then the King will say to those on His right,
‘Come,
you who are blessed of My Father,
inherit the kingdom,
which has been prepared for you from the foundation of the world.’ ”
(**Matthew 25:34, 2022 LSB**)

He announces the **punishment** of the wicked in Matthew 25:41:

41 “Then He will also say to those on His left,
‘Depart from Me,
accursed ones,
into the eternal fire
which has been prepared for the devil and his angels’ ”
(**Matthew 25:41, 2022 LSB**)

Let's compare these.

To His righteous ones, Jesus will say, **Come!** To the wicked, He will say, **Depart from Me!**

The righteous are those **blessed of the Father**. The wicked are those **accursed** by the Father.

The righteous **inherit the Kingdom**, which indicates belonging. The wicked do not inherit **eternal fire**; they are only cast **into** it.

The Kingdom the righteous inherit was prepared **for them** before creation. The eternal fire into which the wicked are cast was prepared **for the devil and his angels**.

All of these are perfect opposites.

- Come and depart.
- Blessed and accursed.
- The Kingdom of God and eternal fire.
- Prepared **for you** and prepared **for the devil and his angels**.

RIGHTEOUSNESS & WICKEDNESS

Matthew 25:35-36, 42-43

Jesus then speaks about their relative righteous and unrighteous acts but in a very focused way. Notice the pronouns that He uses.

35 '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;
36 naked, and you clothed Me;
I was sick, and you visited Me;
I was in prison, and you came to Me.'
(Matthew 25:35-36, 2022 LSB)

Those pronouns continue when He condemns the wicked.

42 for I was hungry, and you gave Me nothing to eat;
I was thirsty, and you gave Me nothing to drink;
43 I was a stranger, and you did not invite Me in;
naked, and you did not clothe Me;
sick, and in prison, and you did not visit Me.'
(Matthew 25:42-43, 2022 LSB)

He is not speaking of good works in general, but good works they should have shown Him.

This confuses both the righteous and the wicked, but for different reasons.

EQUAL CONFUSION

Matthew 25:37-39, 44

First, the righteous.

37 “Then the righteous will answer Him, saying,
 ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You,
 or thirsty, and give You something to drink?
38 And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in,
 or naked, and clothe You?
39 And when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?’ ”
(Matthew 25:37–39, 2022 LSB)

Then the wicked.

44 “Then they themselves also will answer, saying,
 ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger,
 or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not take care of You?’ ”
(Matthew 25:44, 2022 LSB)

We can summarize these statements this way. Jesus says to the righteous, “You served Me in my need,” and the righteous answer, “Lord, we don't know how we did that because we never saw You in need.”

And Jesus says to the wicked, “You ignored me in my need,” and the wicked answer, “Lord, we never saw You in need, and we certainly would not have ignored You.”

Both sides need an explanation, and Jesus gives it.

CLARITY

Matthew 25:40, 45

Jesus says to the righteous,

40 “And the King will answer and say to them,

‘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.’ ”
(Matthew 25:40, 2022 LSB)

To the wicked He says,

45 “Then He will answer them, saying,
‘Truly I say to you,
to the extent that you did not do it to one of the least of these [My brothers],
you did not do it to Me.’ ”
(Matthew 25:45, 2022 LSB)

What does Jesus mean by “My brothers?” The “brothers” of Jesus are His people, those who have been saved by grace through faith.

11 For both He who sanctifies [Jesus]
and those who are being sanctified [Christians]
are all of One [Father];
for which reason He is not ashamed to call them **brothers**
(Hebrews 2:11, 2022 LSB)

When a sinner is saved by grace through faith, born again, and adopted into the family of God, Jesus becomes their brother. Jesus is the only *begotten* Son of God (John 1:18), but the Father has *many* adopted sons and daughters. The words *brother* and *son* are used because, in the ancient Jewish world, only sons had a legal claim to an inheritance. The Father does not demean women by calling them sons; He elevates them by saying that they share equally in every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ.

To be saved is to be placed *in* Christ, to be joined with Him in His death and resurrection, and to share with Jesus in His inheritance. This is not just a spiritual or legal identification. Christ’s relationship with His Bride, the church, is not a marriage of convenience. The Lord takes our relationship with Him very personally.

The Pharisee, Saul of Tarsus, had been persecuting Christians in and around Jerusalem and then headed off to Damascus to attack believers there. The Lord Jesus confronted Him outside Damascus and said, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting **Me**?” Saul said. “Who are you, lord?” Jesus responded.

“I am Jesus, **whom you are persecuting.**” (Acts 9:3-5).

Every insult thrown at a Christian is taken personally by the Lord Jesus. Every attack on a Christian is an attack on the Lord Himself. Those who hold Christians in contempt hold Jesus in contempt. There’s a bumper sticker that I’ve seen that reads, “Lord, save me from Your people.” That’s the same as saying, “Lord, save me from Yourself.”

Jesus wasn’t being poetic when He said in Matthew 28:20, “I am with you.”

He wasn’t exaggerating when He said,

16 “The one who listens to you listens to Me,
and the one who rejects you rejects Me.
And he who rejects Me rejects the One who sent Me.”
(**Luke 10:16, 2022 LSB**)

Or,

20 “Truly, truly, I say to you,
he who receives anyone I send receives Me;
and he who receives Me
receives Him who sent Me.”
(**John 13:20, 2022 LSB**)

Here’s the thing. Jesus never identifies with every human being but only with His brethren. It isn’t wrong to take care of unbelievers in need; not at all. But we have this principle in Galatians 6:

10 So then, while we have opportunity,
let us do good to all people,
and **especially to those who are of the household of the faith.**
(**Galatians 6:10, 2022 LSB**)

Romans 12:13 commands us to contribute to the needs of the saints.

Second John commands us NOT to welcome false Christians or false teachers as our family in Christ.

Third John commands TO show hospitality to genuine believers and faithful teachers.

So, Jesus does not reward the righteous for being good to everyone, regardless of their spiritual state. He says that the righteous served His people, His disciples, those whom He calls “My brethren.” And when they did that, they served Him and revealed their righteousness.

Neither does Jesus say that the wicked failed to do good to everyone. He says that the wicked ignored His people, His disciples, those whom He calls “My brethren.” And when they failed to care for Christians, they showed contempt for Jesus Himself and revealed their unrighteousness.

Jesus identifies so closely with His people that those who bless us are blessing Him, and those who curse us are cursing Him.

WHEN THE DUST SETTLES

Matthew 25:46

The final verse of Matthew 25 reveals the outcome of the final judgment.

**46 “And [the wicked] will go away into eternal punishment,
but the righteous into eternal life.”
(Matthew 25:46, 2022 LSB)**

The word eternal is beyond our comprehension. It describes that which will never cease, that which will never fade. Eternal life and eternal punishment both describe never-ending conditions.

Those cast into eternal punishment will never escape it. They will experience no relief from it. They will never get used to it.

Now, is hell a literal place, or is this figurative language? Well, if it is a figure of speech, then hell is so utterly awful that the Scripture describes it as the bowl – the caldera – of an active volcano. The reality of hell is so disturbing that some try to dismiss it. It’s just a metaphor, they say. But figurative language in the Bible always points to something greater and more intense than the figure of speech. So, if the descriptions of hell are metaphorical, no one in hell will say, “Hey, this isn’t as bad as they said.” They’ll say, “Oh, I wish it were only fire and brimstone!”

But here’s the wonderful news – the righteous go into eternal life! What will eternal life be like?

It will be a physical existence. We will not spend eternity in heaven as spiritual beings but on a new earth as resurrected men and women (Revelation 21:1).

There will be no death, only life.

There will be no grief, only joy.

There will be no crying or pain, only rejoicing and godly pleasure (Revelation 21:4).

The Lord God Almighty and the Lamb of God will always be present (Revelation 21:22).

It will be so perfectly illuminated by the light of God shining through the Lamb that there will be no need for the sun or moon (Revelation 21:23).

It will contain only that which is glorious (Revelation 21:24).

It will be unchangingly holy, unchangingly right, unchangingly good as God measures good. (Revelation 21:27).

The very water of eternity will be life (Revelation 22:1).

The very food of eternity will be life (Revelation 22:2).

The throne of God and Jesus will be there.

We will see His face (Revelation 22:4).

Eternity will be a place of perfect rest (First Thessalonians 1:6-7).

It will be a place of physical activity, such as eating and drinking (Luke 14:15).

It will be a place of music (Revelation 15:2).

It will be a place of joyful, fruitful service (Revelation 7:15).

BRINGING IT HOME

Let's consider what the final judgment means to us.

If you are not a Christian, then the final judgment will be entirely terrifying and end in the worst possible way. As the book of Hebrews says, we live once, die once, and then face the judgment of God. The romantic idea that God will weigh our good and bad deeds on the day of judgment and then decide where we go is false. We are born as children of wrath by nature. God's condemnation of the wicked – which is right and just, by the way (Psalm 51:4) – has already been determined. The final judgment is not where the wicked undergo a trial of their guilt but where they are sentenced. If I could first know every heart and then have the power to change every heart, I would. As it is, I can only proclaim what God has revealed in the Scripture. I plead with you to take it seriously.

If you are a Christian, you not only don't *have* to fear the judgment of God, you *shouldn't* fear it. Jesus bore the wrath of God against every person who would believe in Him. "It is finished," He said on the cross. He promises never to cast away any person the Father gives Him. No one, not even Satan himself, has the power to pluck us from the hand of God.

All of us can look in our hearts and see sin, can't we? We can all see where we have wronged God. Christian, every single one of those sins, no matter how many of them there are, have been washed away by the blood of the Savior. God does not judge you by YOUR memories but by HIS. "As far as the east is from the west, that's how far God has removed our transgressions from us" (Psalm 103:12). The righteousness of God – the only righteousness that He will recognize – comes not through keeping any Law or obedience or good works, but through faith in Jesus Christ (Romans 3:21-22).

Now, as far as our lives in Christ go, we have peace with God and should never fear His judgment. But since we know the righteousness of our God and the truth of His Word, we ought to fear for those around us. Many of them are doing things that are unhealthy and bad for them. Some drink, some use drugs, some live in sinful relationships, and some are solely focused on work, money, possessions, or having a good time.

But there's something worse than a hangover, or a bad marriage, or being in debt, or being a workaholic. Hell is just over the horizon for those who don't know Christ. There will be no drugs, alcohol, sex, or money to provide a distraction or ease the pain.

We know there is something infinitely more fantastic than any pleasure or joy we have ever experienced. And we know that the difference between the two is so very simple. If they will but turn from their sin and look to Jesus and call upon His name, He will save them.

We cannot know the will of God for any person in particular, but we know His will for us. We must speak and pray. We must speak the Gospel of Jesus Christ to them. And we must pray that the

Father would have mercy on them, find their names written in the Lamb's Book of Life, draw them to the Lord Jesus, and grant them faith and repentance.