

The Future Judgment of the Nations

Matthew 25:31-46

Matthew 25:31-46 - *“When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. ³² All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. ³³ And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. ³⁴ Then the King will say to those on His right hand, ‘Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: ³⁵ for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; ³⁶ I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.’ ³⁷ “Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? ³⁸ When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? ³⁹ Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?’ ⁴⁰ And the King will answer and say to them, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.’*

⁴¹ “Then He will also say to those on the left hand, ‘Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels: ⁴² for I was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink; ⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.’

⁴⁴Then they also will answer Him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to You?’ ⁴⁵ Then He will answer them, saying, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.’ ⁴⁶ And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

Background Notes

The Olivet discourse, as given in Matthew, appears to be structured in three sections. The first section could be called the “Jewish aspect,” and is covered in Matthew 24:1-44. Although the worldwide view of the coming Tribulation and the Return of Christ is seen in this section, there is an emphasis on the Jewish people and the restored “Jewish remnant” of the end times. The second section of the Olivet discourse can be called the “Christian aspect.” This section runs from Matthew 24:45 - 25:30. In the second section of the Olivet discourse, the Lord gave three parables of the kingdom of heaven that cover the present age of Christendom. In Christendom, in the present age, the wise and the foolish, the true and the false, the faithful and the unfaithful exist together. All will be sorted out when the Lord returns.

In Matthew 25:31-46 we have the third section of the Olivet discourse. This section could be called the “Gentile aspect” of the discourse, because in this section the subject is the future judgment of the Gentile nations. This judgment is known as

“The Judgment of the Sheep and the Goats,” because the Lord likened this judgment to a shepherd dividing his flock of sheep and goats. Even today, Bedouin shepherds of the Middle East have both sheep and goats in their flocks. The animals graze together, but periodically the shepherd will separate the sheep from the goats. Our Lord used this everyday illustration to describe the coming Judgment of the Sheep and the Goats.

Doctrinal Points

1. The Judgment of the Sheep and the Goats is a judgment of the nations.

“When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left” (v31-33).

Verse 32 clearly says that this is a judgment of the **nations**. The idea here is not that there are “sheep nations” and “goat nations.” In other words, at the Judgment of the Sheep and the Goats, the Lord won’t say something like, “All right, U.S.A. and Canada, you’re sheep nations, and Russia and Syria, you’re goat nations” - or something like that! No. The idea is that there are sheep and goats within the various Gentile nations. It is individuals within the nations who will be judged as to whether they are “sheep” or “goats.”

When will this Judgment of the Sheep and the Goats take place? Verse 31 gives the answer: *“When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory.”* So this judgment will take place at the end of the future Tribulation Period, when the Lord sets up His throne for His glorious kingdom here on earth. This judgment is **not** the same as the Great White Throne Judgment of Revelation 20. The Great White Throne judgment will take place **after** the Lord’s millennial kingdom here on this earth.

Most likely the prophet Joel was referring to the Judgment of the Sheep and the Goats in Joel 3:1-2: *“For behold, in those days and at that time, when I bring back the captives of Judah and Jerusalem, I will also gather all nations, and bring them down to the Valley of Jehoshaphat; and I will enter into judgment with them there on account of My people, My heritage Israel, whom they have scattered among the nations. They have also divided up My land.”*

The “Valley of Jehoshaphat” may be the Kidron Valley just outside of Jerusalem, between the Temple Mount and the Mount of Olives, but we can’t be sure. Notice from Joel 3:1 that the time of this judgment is when the captivity of Judea and Jerusalem is over, and when the fortunes of Judea and Jerusalem have been restored. This passage cannot possibly refer to the return of Jews from the Babylonian captivity, because the Lord didn’t gather all nations together for judgment at that time. So we believe that this passage from Joel refers to the end of the future Tribulation Period, when the Lord will return and restore the Land and nation of Israel - both physically and spiritually. At that time, God will judge the nations. The Judgment of the Sheep and the Goats is a judgment of the nations.

2. The Judgment of the Sheep and the Goats is a judgment based on works.

Notice that the reward for the sheep is to inherit the kingdom. *“Then the King will say to those on His right hand, ‘Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world...’* (v34). The kingdom that is mentioned here is the millennial kingdom of our Lord, the kingdom that He will set up here on earth. So the Judgment of the Sheep and the Goats has to do primarily with the nations of the end times, during the Tribulation period, and it is a judgment based on works.

What “works”? The judgment is based on the good works of caring for the Lord’s brethren. Notice what the Lord will say to the sheep: *“And the King will answer and say to them, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me’* (v40). You did “it” - did what? You did works of kindness! When you cared for “one of the least of these My brethren,” you showed compassion and kindness for **Me!** And notice what the Lord will say to the goats: *“Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me”* (v45). Did **not** do what? They did not care for or show kindness to “one of the least of these My brethren.”

Who are these people that the Lord calls “My brethren”? Are these Christians in the Church? No. We believe that the Church will be in heaven during the time of the future Tribulation Period. The people the Lord calls “My brethren” are the believers of the Tribulation Period. Specifically, they are the faithful Jewish believers of the Tribulation Period. These are the 144,000 Jewish evangelists of Revelation 7 who preach the gospel of the kingdom during the Tribulation Period.

Anti-Semitism will run rampant during the Tribulation. Zechariah 14:2 says, *“For I will gather all the nations to battle against Jerusalem; the city shall be taken, the houses rifled, and the women ravished. Half of the city shall go into captivity, but the remnant of the people shall not be cut off from the city.”* The people of the Gentile nations who show compassion and kindness to the oppressed and persecuted Jewish believers during that future time are the “sheep.” They will be rewarded on the basis of their works of kindness and compassion. Works of kindness and compassion are really “works of faith,” aren’t they? Although their faith in the Lord as Savior is the means for them to enter the kingdom, that **faith is made evident by their works** of kindness, compassion and care for the Jewish believers at that time.

The “sheep” will risk their lives when they reach out to help Jewish believers during the Tribulation Period. This is the time when the “Roman beast” and the anti-Christ will rule the world. The people of the Gentile nations who help and protect Jewish believers at that time will be like the righteous Gentiles of World War II, who hid and protected Jews from the evil Nazi regime. They did so at the risk of their own lives, and many of them were killed for their acts of compassion and help. The fact that the “goats” will not help the Jewish believers in any way at this terrible time will be evidence that these Gentiles have no faith in the Lord Jesus. The Judgment of the Sheep and the Goats is a judgment based on works.

3. The Judgment of the Sheep and the Goats is a judgment resulting in eternal destinies.

“And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life” (v46).

The “everlasting punishment” mentioned here is hell, as we can see clearly from verse 41: *“Then He will also say to those on the left hand, ‘Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels.’”* Notice that hell was not prepared for people, but for the devil and the fallen angels. However, unbelieving people will end up in hell if they reject Christ and the salvation He has provided. This is the eternal destiny of the “goats” of the Tribulation Period.

On the other hand, the “sheep” will enter the glorious kingdom of our Lord on this earth, and then will enter the Eternal State. The Judgment of the Sheep and the Goats is a judgment resulting in eternal destinies.

Practical Application

Remember, God’s “rule of thumb” is grace!

“Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?’ And the King will answer and say to them, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me” (v37-40).

In these verses, it seems that the sheep are happily surprised at God’s grace! They didn’t realize that their works of kindness to the Jewish believers at that time were evidence of their own faith. But the Lord knew it, and saw it, and rewarded them accordingly.

If this will be true during the Tribulation Period, it is certainly true today. The Lord takes note of our little works of kindness and compassion - works that are evidence of our faith in Him as our Savior. And He will reward us at the Judgment Seat of Christ. I think all believers will be surprised when they find out the little works of faith that the Lord has noticed and remembered, and that He will graciously reward in that future day! Remember, God’s “rule of thumb” is **grace**.