



Jesus, Judgment and Eternal Destiny

Matthew 25:31-46

By Thomas L. Trevethan

We believe in the victorious reign and future personal return of Jesus Christ, who will judge all people with justice and mercy, giving over the unrepentant to eternal condemnation but receiving the redeemed to eternal life.

Is there a final judgment? If so, how will we be judged? Take a closer look at the Judge himself and what he expects on that final day.

1. Read [Matthew 25:31-46](#) aloud. On first hearing, what strikes you most in this passage? Why is it significant that Jesus is the one who is speaking?
2. Sometimes this passage is described as a parable. Do you think that is a correct description? To begin to answer this question, compare this passage to the one immediately preceding it in [Matthew 25:14-30](#), "the parable of the talents." How are the two passages similar? How are they different?
3. An Old Testament vision of "the Son of Man" in [Daniel 7:9-14](#) is the background of this teaching of Jesus. Compare Daniel 7 with [Matthew 25:31-46](#), reading each passage carefully. How are they similar? Note particularly the ways in which Jesus' teaching goes beyond that of Daniel. For example, who is the judge, whose throne is seen in the vision, who is judged, on what basis are they judged?
4. Focus on vv. 31-33. Describe the scene. When will it take place, and who will be involved? From these verses, what do you learn about the Lord Jesus? What do you learn about "all the nations?"

Jesus uses a simile in verses 32-33 ("*he will separate . . . as a shepherd . . .*") that draws on a common event in his time. Sheep and goats that regularly mixed in the flocks were hard to distinguish. The sheep had more commercial value so shepherds had to identify and separate the sheep and goats in the herd. By using this image, what truth does Jesus convey about judgment?

5. The king speaks first to those on his right (vv. 34-40) and then to those on his left (vv. 41-45). Compare what he says in these two sections.
 - What similarities and differences do you see?
 - What repetitions do you observe?
 - How are these observations important in interpreting the meaning of Jesus' teaching?
6. How are the people on the Judge's right described in vv. 34-40? What do they receive? What have they done, in the judgment of the king? What does their response to the verdict tell you about them?

7. Focus on the king's verdict for those on his left (v. 41-45). How are the people in this group described? What do they receive? What evil have they done? Why, then, do they receive this negative judgment? What does their response to the verdict tell you about them?
8. Pay close attention to the stark contrast between these two groups. How do they stand in relationship to the Son of Man? How does Jesus describe their destiny (see especially v. 46)?

MAKING IT PERSONAL

- Many find this passage surprising and troubling. What aspects of this passage did you find surprising or troubling? How do you feel about this passage?
- Marxists and secularists say, "Religion is the opiate of the masses." They claim that people come to their beliefs because it makes them happy or peaceful or because it gives them good feelings about themselves. How does this passage fit with this description? How does it challenge your own assumptions about how you should determine what to believe?
- Review the first question: Why is it significant that Jesus is the one speaking in this passage?
- How should this description of the final judgment and destiny of the human race ("all nations") affect you? What effect does it have on how you view the people in your life? Consider the classic statement by C.S. Lewis in his "Weight of Glory" sermon:

"It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations – these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit – immortal horrors or everlasting splendors." --[The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses](#), Eerdmans, 1975, pp. 14-15.

- What should you do in response to this passage? Notice the repetition: "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, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me." How does this become a statement of the priorities of discipleship to Jesus? How could you begin fulfill this description of discipleship, knowing the King will take great delight in even your most halting efforts?

GOING DEEPER

- In v. 40 Jesus describes those who have been cared for by the “righteous” as “the least of these brothers [and sisters] of mine.” Who are these needy people?
 - See who Jesus refers to as his “brothers” in Matthew 12:48-50 and 28:10.
 - Who are “the least of these” (or, more literally “these little ones”) in the teaching of Jesus? Jesus refers to “these little ones” in Matthew 10:42 and Matthew 18:6, 10, 14. Who does Jesus view as “the least of these?”
 - What does this information about the text tell you about the criterion of judgment in this passage? Does it lead you to think differently about the meaning of this passage than you might otherwise? Why or why not?

- Some careful readers of the gospels have concluded that Jesus is “the New Testament theologian of hell.” They observe that only Jesus refers to “Hell” (the Hebrew word “Gehenna”). The word is derived from the name of a deep, narrow gorge southeast of Jerusalem (“the valley of Ben Hinnom”) where idolatrous Israelites offered up child sacrifices to the gods Moloch and Baal in Old Testament times. The valley was used as a garbage dump and viewed as a God-forsaken place of judgment. Consider the following passages from across the gospels: Matthew 5:22, 29, 30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15, 23; Mark 9:43, 45, 47; Luke 12:5. Be careful to read the context for these verses.

TOOLS FOR FURTHER GROWTH

Bruce Milne, [*The Message of Heaven and Hell*](#), InterVarsity Press, 2006. A survey of the Bible’s teaching on human destiny, with very capable and faithful expositions of the key passages in Scripture about the last judgment and eternal destiny. The biblical overview of this material is the best available. This valuable resource is part of [The Bible Speaks Today Series](#).

J. I. Packer, [*Knowing God*](#), InterVarsity Press, 1993, “God the Judge,” chapter 14, pp. 138-147. A classic statement of Bible-based faith, this a one of the few works produced in our era which will still be read a century from now (should Christ not return sooner). This chapter makes the case for the Biblical view of judgment from Scripture and defends it cogently by argument.

C. S. Lewis, [*The Great Divorce*](#) (Harper One, 2001). This imaginative fictional account is faithful to the teaching of Jesus that all people are headed to one of two destinies.