

The Judgment of the “Nations” – The Sheep and the Goats

Matthew 25:31-46

(by Tom Finley)

Many details can be discussed on this topic, but here is a summary.

Judging the world in righteousness:

When the Lord comes back He is coming to judge the earth in righteousness.

(Psa 98:9) Before the LORD, for He is coming to judge the earth; He will judge the world with righteousness and the peoples with equity.

He will judge both the living and the dead (2 Tim. 4:1). There are a number of different groups, or persons, that receive judgment. For example, the dead OT era Jews receive a specific judgment (Dan. 12:2). All believers in the body of Christ are judged at the Bema, the Judgment Seat of Christ (2 Cor. 5:10). The dead unbelievers, and maybe other dead ones, are judged at the Great White Throne judgment, following the Millennium (Rev. 20:11-15). The beast and the false prophet are judged in summary fashion (no tribunal) at the end of tribulation era before the Millennium (Rev. 19:20). These are examples. We will examine how Matt. 25:31-46 entails a judgment upon living Gentiles, or peoples, who are alive at the end of this age and who are not Jews or believers who are specifically members of the body of Christ.

Let us keep in mind that judgments carried out by Jesus when He returns are based upon works.

(Rev 22:12) "Behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward *is* with Me, **to render to every man according to what he has done.**

These future judgments are not examinations to see who has believed. They are an examination for recompense – pay back - based upon one's doings. Remember, though, no one escapes eternal punishment by his doings. Indeed, the **Scripture clearly teaches that no person can be acceptable to God (justified for an eternity with God) based upon His doings:**

(Rom 3:9) What then? Are we better than they? Not at all; for we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin;

(Rom 3:10) as it is written, "THERE IS NONE RIGHTEOUS, NOT EVEN ONE;

(Rom 3:11) THERE IS NONE WHO UNDERSTANDS, THERE IS NONE WHO SEEKS FOR GOD;

(Rom 3:12) ALL HAVE TURNED ASIDE, TOGETHER THEY HAVE BECOME USELESS; THERE IS NONE WHO DOES GOOD, THERE IS NOT EVEN ONE."

(Rom 3:13) "THEIR THROAT IS AN OPEN GRAVE, WITH THEIR TONGUES THEY KEEP DECEIVING," "THE POISON OF ASPS IS UNDER THEIR LIPS";

(Rom 3:14) "WHOSE MOUTH IS FULL OF CURSING AND BITTERNESS";

(Rom 3:15) "THEIR FEET ARE SWIFT TO SHED BLOOD,

(Rom 3:16) DESTRUCTION AND MISERY ARE IN THEIR PATHS,

(Rom 3:17) AND THE PATH OF PEACE THEY HAVE NOT KNOWN."

(Rom 3:18) "THERE IS NO FEAR OF GOD BEFORE THEIR EYES."

(Rom 3:19) Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God;

(Rom 3:20) because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law *comes* the knowledge of sin.

(Rom 3:21) But now apart from the Law *the* righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets,

(Rom 3:22) even *the* righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction;

We see from these verses that only through faith, not works, can a person obtain a righteousness that is acceptable to God. Indeed, this righteousness, credited by faith, was available for OT Jews who did not know about Jesus specifically, but placed their faith in God's promises and provisions (Rom. 4:1-11). It had nothing to do with works. In conclusion, the righteousness that makes a person acceptable before God for eternity is only through faith, apart from works, and this principle applies to all persons over all dispensations and time periods.

Identifying "the nations":

The group being judged in Matt. 25:31-46 are the "nations." This word does not mean "nations" like we think of this word today, such as the nation of India, the nation of Bhutan, or the nation of the USA. The Greek word for "nations" is *ethnos* (Strong's #1484), from which we derive the word "ethnic." The KJV translates this Greek word in different places as Gentile, heathen, nation or people. The word as used in the plural ("nations") means **the various peoples**

who are not Jews or who are not members of the body of Christ. (Although on occasion the NT uses the word Gentiles to describe those in the body of Christ, it is only used to distinguish them from their Jewish brethren in Christ – Gal. 2:12 and elsewhere.) In the New Testament, the Scripture breaks down all persons into **three basic categories**: the Jews, the Gentiles (“nations”) and the church. Jews are those who are physically descended from Jacob. The church contains those who are born again and are sons of God, being also placed into the body of Christ (Gal. 3:26; 1 Cor. 12:12-13). Once a person in this dispensation of the church age believes in Christ and is placed into the body of Christ, then in God’s eyes he is no longer a “Jew” or a “Gentile.” See Eph. 3:4-6. Also, often the Scripture will use the word for a “Greek” (*Hellen*, Strong’s # 1672) as an equivalent to “Gentile.” In writing on the use of the word “Greek” used to mean “gentile,” W. E. Vine states:

“It [*hellen*] became applied to such Gentiles as spoke the Greek language, e. g., Gal. 2:3; 3:28. Since that was the common medium of intercourse in the Roman Empire, Greek and Gentile became more or less interchangeable terms. For this term the RV [Revised Version] always adheres to the word “Greeks,” e. g., John 7:35; Rom. 2:9, 10; 3:9; **1 Cor. 10:32, where the local church is distinguished from Jews and Gentiles;** 12:13.)”¹ [Emphasis added]

Note this mention of **1 Cor. 10:32** above. This is where we see the three terms Gentile (using the word “Greek”), Jews, and the church of God as distinguishing three groups of people. The KJV translates the word Greek here as “Gentile” but most translations do not. The point is, however, that these two words, in the context of the Mediterranean world of that day, had some equivalency in usage.

(1Co 10:32) Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God;

Once a person is in the body of Christ, the old cultural or ethnic distinctions disappear, spiritually speaking. A person “in Christ” is no longer a Greek or a Gentile. (See Gal. 3:26-28; Col. 3:10-11)

In conclusion, in the New Testament era of grace, or the church, God takes people out of the Gentiles (non-Jewish peoples) and out of the Jewish race and places these who have believed in Jesus into the body of Christ (Acts 15:14, 19; 1 Cor. 12:2). Therefore, God now sees three broad groups of people: the “nations” (or non-Jewish people), the Jews, and the church of God. A person belongs, in God’s eyes, to only one of these groups.

The judged:

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

(Mat 25:32) "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;

Those who are judged are these “nations” or “peoples,” **who are living at the end of this age when the Lord comes back** on the clouds in glory (Matt. 24:30) and then sets up his throne on the earth at Jerusalem (Is. 24:23; Jer. 3:17). There is no mention of the “dead,” which are specifically judged after the millennium at the great white throne (Rev. 20:11-15). The Lord is coming to judge “the living and the dead” (Acts 10:42; 2 Tim. 4:1). At this point in time, many of the peoples of the earth will have been killed by various plagues and judgments and a final battle, but the remaining living peoples (non-Jews) will be gathered for this judgment.

Basis of judgment:

The basis of the judgment is how these living people treated those whom the Lord called “these brothers of Mine” (Matt. 25:40). This term, “these brothers of mine,” most likely refers to Christian believers (Matt. 28:10; Jn. 20:17; Heb. 2:11-12). Although Jesus was physically a Jew, due to the Jews’ rejection of Christ, it seems that the Scripture shows He does not have a “brother” relationship with unbelieving Jews (Matt. 12:47-50). Additionally, the Lord states that the care given to these “brothers” equals care given to Him, and, conversely, care not given to these “brothers” equals care not given to Christ. This identification reminds us of Christ’s identification with His NT believers when the Lord spoke to Saul, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” (Acts 9:4).

The “brothers” of the Lord who received, or did not receive, care from the sheep and goats would most likely be believers who were not raptured from the earth before “the hour of testing” fell upon the earth (Rev. 3:10). This “hour of testing” means the great tribulation (Matt. 24:15, 21). The Christians who remain are persecuted by the beast (Antichrist) per Rev. 12:13; 17; 13:7). During this terrible period, or perhaps even shortly before the last three and a half years, the “gospel of the kingdom” will be preached as a “testimony to the nations” (Matt. 24:14). This “gospel of the kingdom” is most likely an announcement of the impending inauguration of the Kingdom of Christ – telling the peoples that Christ is about to come to set up His kingdom. However, although this gospel emphasizes the coming of Christ, it surely includes the story of Christ and His redemptive work at His first coming. Some of these “nations” (peoples) will believe this word and act righteously in light of it by caring for the persecuted Christians. Through their faith in this gospel and in Christ, these sheep become the saved, or justified, nations (Rom. 3:26; 4:2-5).

In addition, according to Rev. 14, after the Christian overcomers are taken out of the earth (verse 1-5), an angel from God will announce “the eternal gospel,” plainly telling all those on the earth that the hour of God’s judgment has arrived and they should fear God and give Him glory and worship Him as the Creator (Rev. 14:6-7). Those who believe this message and respond to it positively will

no doubt realize that the Christians under persecution are God's children who need their help. So, they render some help to them. It is this help that is recognized by Christ at this judgment.

Result of the judgment:

The judgment is not to determine or award eternal salvation, as eternal salvation is by grace, apart from works (Rom. 3:9-20; 11:6). This judgment is under the **principle of recompense (reward) according to works** (Rev. 22:12). The goats are recompensed because of their works, being consigned to the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels (v. 41). The judgment upon the devil does not take place until after the millennium, however (Rev. 20:10, 15). But, the beast and the false prophet have already been cast into this lake before this judgment of the nations, as they are dealt with immediately after the final battle at the end of the age (Rev. 19:20).

The sheep (the living approved nations) are recompensed for their works of caring for the believers during the tribulation era. Their reward is entry "into eternal life." This speaks firstly of the enjoyment of eternal life in the age to come, the 1,000 year period of the renewed earth, or "the regeneration" (Matt. 19:16, 17, 28; Mk. 10:30; Lk. 10:25-28; Lk. 18:30). But, the experience of this "eternal life" will continue for these sheep for eternity as the saved "nations" who will be in the new earth (Rev. 21:24-26).

These sheep do not earn eternal salvation by their works, but are rewarded with participation in the coming kingdom of 1,000 years due to their works (they "inherit the kingdom" [v. 34] – the kingdom of Christ's reign of 1,000 years). Their eternal "salvation" was already given to them prior to this judgment because they believed the gospel of the kingdom and the eternal gospel.

These sheep are the saved nations, distinct from the church:

As pointed out in the first portion of this article, the "nations" are distinct from the church, the body of Christ. This is again seen in that these nations are the **subjects** of Christ's coming kingdom, whereas the overcoming believers are the **rulers** in the coming kingdom (Dan. 7:14; Mic. 4:3; Rev. 2:26; 2 Tim 2:12; Rev. 20:4-6). This distinction carries through into the eternal age of the new heavens and the new earth. At that time, the church, as the wife of the Lamb, constitutes the New Jerusalem, the holy city (Rev. 21:9-23). But the "nations" are outside of the city, walking in its light, with the kings of the earthly nations bringing their glory into the city (Rev. 21:24-26).

All of this suggests that there is a dispensational change near the end of the age that includes at least the period of the great tribulation (the last 3.5 years). Note that the works for which the sheep and the goats are evaluated are all works that occur during this final period, suggesting a judgment based upon a dispensational change. During this time, the church age is apparently closed and those who believe and are “saved” (justified before God) are not placed into the body of Christ.

I am uncertain about the dynamics of the “salvation” of these nations due to their distinction from the body of Christ. Perhaps they are born again (regenerated in their spirits) as NT believers are. Or perhaps during the time of the great tribulation they only receive some power of the Spirit upon them from God in answer to prayer in order to endure. During the millennium they still have earthly (not glorified or immortal) bodies with a sin nature, since they apparently give birth to children who have sin natures, some of whom rebel at the end of the millennium (Rev. 20:7-10). During eternity they *may* only receive redeemed bodies where sin is removed, being innocent like Adam in the garden before the fall, but not regenerated with the new nature. In this innocence, Adam was able to freely walk in the presence of God. Alternatively, their constitution may include the new nature through regeneration, thus being the same as the members of the body of Christ. God knows these details, but I do not have the confidence to say definitively. Bible teachers hold varying views.

The question is asked about both the sheep and the goats addressing Christ as “Lord” (Matt. 25:37, 44). Does this mean that both groups are believers? No. During the current dispensation of the church, only believers can confess Jesus as Lord in sincerity (1 Cor. 12:3). But at that scene of judgment, Jesus Christ is openly manifest in His glory on His throne. Everyone realizes then who He is and what His position is. Each one standing before this glorious throne will address Him as Lord because they must then acknowledge His Lordship in His glorious presence. See Phil. 2:9-11. Also, to say that the goats (who go into eternal fire) are believers is to violate the clear truth of eternal security.

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ⁱ W. E. Vine, *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, pp. 262-263