

BaptistWay Bible Series for Feb. 27: The day of judgment without doubt will come_22105

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The day of judgment without doubt will come

Matthew 25:31-46

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For some three months now, we have been studying the discourses of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel. In doing so, we have read and reflected upon most all of Matthew 5-7, 10, 13, 18 and 23. (We noted last week, however, that most scholars do not regard chapter 23 to be a part of Jesus' Eschatological Discourse, which usually is thought to run from 24:1-25:46.)

This week, we will conclude our quarterly study of Jesus' speeches in Matthew by considering the concluding passage in Jesus' fifth and final discourse in the first Gospel, namely, 25:31-46. This sobering text focuses on the Son of Man's separation of the sheep (or the "righteous") from the goats (that is, the "unrighteous") when he comes in glory and in judgment.

Matthew 25:31-46 is part of a larger unit wherein Jesus speaks of the

temple's destruction (24:1-2), as well as of various signs harbingering the end of the age and the coming of the Son of Man (24:3-35). In his Eschatological Discourse, Jesus also calls his disciples to be faithful and watchful until he comes (24:36-44). Thereafter, three story-parables follow that reinforce and extend Jesus' instruction regarding fidelity and vigilance with respect to his return—The Parable of the Faithful or Unfaithful Slave (24:45-51), The Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids (25:1-13), and The Parable of the Talents (25:14-30).



Not a few interpreters also consider 25:31-46 to be a parable. Whether or not one classifies these verses as such, it needs to be noted that various figures of speech are employed to depict the coming Son of Man's judgment of the nations. Nowhere is this clearer than in 25:32, where Jesus likens himself to a shepherd and those he will judge the sheep and goats respectively.

As it happens, interpretive conundrums arising from this passage are not limited to how it is best labeled. In fact, one no more than begins to read the text for this week's lesson before encountering an exegetical nettle.

It is clear enough that 25:31 refers to the Lord's coming in judgment. But precisely who are "the nations" to be judged by him? Although Matthean commentators have construed "the nations" variously, given the way Matthew employs the term nations (Greek, "ethnī") elsewhere in his

Gospel, I think it most probable that the people referred to in 25:32 are those (Gentile) nations/persons Jesus' disciples are to evangelize between their Lord's ascension and return (28:19).

At the time of his coming, the text indicates the Son of Man will be like a shepherd separating the "sheep" from the "goats." In ancient Israel, it was not uncommon for sheep and goats to intermingle. What is more, from a distance or for the unskilled shepherd, the two were not easily distinguishable.

While Ezekiel 34:17 refers to God judging between sheep and goats, John the Baptist declares in Matthew 3:12 that differentiating between the "wheat" (sheep) and the "chaff" (goats) would be a mark of Jesus' ministry. At this point, one may see congruity between Jesus' earthly and kingly ministry.

According to verse 33, when the Son of Man comes in judgment, he will place the sheep at his right hand, the hand of honor and power, and the goats on the left, the place of disgrace. Thereafter, the "king" will invite the sheep, whom he further depicts as blessed by his Father, to come and to inherit the kingdom prepared for them (and others like them) from time immemorial (v. 34).

This invitation, as 25:35-36 indicates, is predicated upon their generosity and hospitality towards none other than the king himself (note the six-time recurring "I" in these two verses). Unaware as to when it was they fed the Lord or offered him a drink or welcomed, clothed, cared for or visited him, the "righteous ones" will inquire regarding the timing of said acts (vv. 37-39). In response, the king will answer that even as they did unto the least of his "brothers" (or "family members") they had done so unto him (v. 40).

The identity of the least of the Lord's brothers is another interpretive

hurdle to negotiate. In the Baptist circles in which I have run, people have tended to equate “the least of these” with individuals who are materially impoverished and needy. While it is true that Jesus' disciples should care about and for the destitute in society, this does not appear to be what Matthew 25:40 and 25:45 mean. Rather, based on Matthew's use of “brothers” and the closely related descriptor “little ones” elsewhere in his Gospel (see especially 10:42), one can be relatively confident in concluding “the least of these my brethren” spoken of in verses 40 and 45 respectively are Jesus' followers in general or perhaps the Lord's messengers in particular.

If this interpretation is accurate, then this passage indicates the way non-Christian people respond to Christ's disciples (and the gospel they herald) simultaneously reflects their response to Christ. This in turn will determine the Lord's subsequent response to them.

For the sheep, as we have seen, there awaits a warm reception (v. 34). For the goats, however, rejection and exclusion are to come, for they failed to extend care to “the least of these,” and by extension, their Lord (vv. 41-46).

This week's text iterates the importance of the Christian mission to the world and assures Christ's disciples of his presence while they are in the world (28:18-20). It may also prompt some believers to anticipate afresh that day when “The kingdom of the world [becomes] the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign forever and ever” (Revelation 11:15).

Discussion questions

❌ Does the separation of the “sheep” from the “goats” cause you alarm? Why?

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