

# *Meeting With Christ*

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Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pastor Eric Chang

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## **AS A SHEPHERD SEPARATES THE SHEEP FROM THE GOATS (2)**

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### **Matthew 25:31-46**

This is the second lesson on the teaching of Jesus concerning the separation of the sheep and goats in Matthew 25:31-46. In the first lesson, we discussed mostly the meaning of the goats. What do the goats represent in Matthew 25? We saw that the goats, just like the sheep, represent Christians. Today we will concentrate on the topic of separation, which in biblical language means judgment. What did Jesus say about the judgment of mankind?

### **Judgment, justice and love**

When we study the subject of judgment, I think one of the first questions that comes to our mind is this one: why is it necessary to have a judgment? Do we really need a judgment? In order to answer that question, we first have to see the link between judgment and justice. Judgment has to do with justice. Try to imagine a world in which justice is absent. A world where justice cannot be applied. A world in which the innocent suffers from wrongdoings. A world in which the wicked enjoy the fruit of their actions. In this kind of world, how can anyone have confidence in the future?

Just take a look at the news. They are filled with examples of people who are the innocent victims of brutal individuals. And when death is involved, that is often when we ask, 'Where is justice?' Indeed, how can justice ever be rendered in such a case? Even if the aggressor were caught, condemned and sent to prison, that will not bring back the life that was taken away. We are left with the uncomfortable feeling that this matter cannot be set right in this life. And because human justice has its limit, we wonder if there is any kind of moral order in this universe. That is the kind of questions that the topic of judgment has to deal with. And I would like to say right from the start that if we do not have confidence in justice, it would leave us without hope for this world.

In fact, having confidence that justice will be done is what allows us in this present life to be able to love in spite of any apparent unfairness. Here I would like you to see another connection, the connection between justice and love. If I feel that there is no chance that justice can be vindicated in this world, it would be very hard for me to love. 'That's not fair,' I would say to myself. I wish I could do something do to the avenging. And because I cannot, I grow bitter. Bitter about the situation. Bitter about life in general. Bitter towards everybody. And when I am bitter, I cannot love.

On the other hand, if I know and believe that no matter what happened, God's justice will prevail, there is no point for me to feel bitter. God will settle the whole account in due time. In fact, if we know the severity of God's judgment, we would feel bad for the wrongdoer. So when you have a deep sense that justice is in the hands of God, when you have the absolute confidence that God will set every matter right, you are free to love. There is no resentment in your heart. You don't see any need

for vengeance. You know that no one will get away with any wrongdoing because God will see that justice is done. By leaving it in the hands of God, you give your heart the freedom to love – no matter how bad the situation is.

## **Christ, the Judge**

With this in mind, let's turn our attention to some other questions. First, who is the judge?

Matthew 25:31 tells us. *When the Son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne.* The throne of judgment. One of the chief functions of a king, as you know, was to exercise judgment. The king, in those days, was like the supreme court. When a case could not be settled, it could be taken to the king. Think of the example of Solomon and the baby that two women claimed to be the mother. As the king, Solomon was asked to exercise his judgment on that case.

So in our passage, we are told that Jesus is the judge. This is a consistent teaching of the Scriptures. In Acts 10:42, Peter was preaching and he said, *And He (Jesus) commanded us to preach to the people, and to testify that it is He who was ordained by God to be Judge of the living and the dead.* Peter said that God ordained Jesus to be judge of both the living and the dead.

The same point is made in John 5:22. *The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son.* Then v. 28 to 29. *He (God) gave Him (Jesus) authority to execute judgment, because He (Jesus) is the Son of Man.* <sup>28</sup> *"Do not marvel at this; for an hour is coming, in which all who are in the tombs shall hear His voice,* <sup>29</sup> *and shall come forth; those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment.* This passage is very clear. God has given Jesus absolute authority to judge. Notice that judgment is based on a person's deeds. Those who have done good deeds will rise to live; those who have done evil deeds will rise to be condemned.

## **The judgment of believers**

Let's move to the 2<sup>nd</sup> question. Who are being judged?

There is, of course, a clear teaching in the Bible which says that everyone will be judged. But in this passage about the separation of sheep and goats, the judgment is about the Christians only. We saw in the previous lesson that the sheep as well as the goats represent believers. The sheep will go the right, and the goats will go to the left. The Lord Jesus is not concerned here about the judgment of non-Christians. He is dealing with the judgment of Christians. In fact, that was his concern in this whole section. Remember the Parable of the Talents. It was not the judgment of servants and non-servants. It was the judgment of all servants, all Christians. Some were faithful; one was unfaithful. Remember the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins. It was not the judgment of believers and unbelievers. It was the judgment of believers. All the virgins represent believers. Five were wise believers; five were foolish believers.

Some Christians have this idea that judgment is only for unbelievers, that believers do not come under any kind of judgment. The Bible does not say that. The Bible says that Christians will be judged too. Take for example Romans 14:10. *But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God.* Notice the last phrase. 'We shall all stand before the judgment.' Paul is talking here as a Christian, not as a non-Christian. He includes himself in the statement. 'We, me included, shall all stand in front of the judgment seat of God to be judged.'

Paul makes a similar statement in 2Corinthians 5:10. *For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive good or evil, according to what he has done in the body.* Notice again, Christ will judge a person according to his actions, whether good or bad.

Now some believers say that there is no judgment for the Christians on the basis of Romans 8:1. What does Romans 8:1 say? *There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.*

Where does it say that there is no judgment for the Christians in that sentence? Yes, we read that there is no condemnation. But it does not say that there is no judgment. You see, you can be judged. And because you are found innocent, there will be no condemnation. You are therefore acquitted. But this does not mean that there is no judgment, that you have not been judged. Judgment and condemnation are not the same thing.

### **Gathering Christians out of the kingdom**

On this question of the condemnation of the Christians, I would like to show you something in the Parable of the Tares. Let's read this story, Matthew 13:37-42.

*Matthew 13.37. He answered and said to them: "He who sows the good seed is the Son of Man.  
38 The field is the world, the good seeds are the sons of the kingdom, but the tares are the sons of the wicked one.  
39 The enemy who sowed them is the devil, the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are the angels.  
40 Therefore as the tares are gathered and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of this age.  
41 The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness,  
42 and will cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth.*

Notice a few things. According to this parable, when will the judgment take place? It will be at the end of the age. V. 39: *The harvest* (i.e. the judgment) *is the end of the age.* When will the end of the age happen? When the Son of man comes again with His angels. So this judgment will happen at the close of the age, when the Son of man comes back.

Who will be judged? For this question, I would like you to look at v. 41 very carefully. *The Son of man will send his angels, and **they will gather out of his kingdom** all causes of sin and all evildoers.*

These evildoers who will be judged, they are not in the world. They are in the kingdom. They are inside of God's kingdom. Because they had to be gathered out of the kingdom. You cannot gather someone out of a place unless he is first inside that place. You cannot gather a person out of the kingdom unless he is first in the kingdom. And how can a person be found in the kingdom of God? There is only one way according to Jesus. John 3:5: *Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.* There it is. You cannot enter the kingdom of God unless you are born of water and of the Spirit. That is the only way. No man can enter the kingdom except through regeneration. And how do we call a person who has been regenerated by the Holy Spirit? A born-again Christian. And yet, Jesus tells us in the Parable of the Tares that some who have entered into the kingdom, some born-again Christians, will not be found acceptable by the Lord. They will be gathered out of God's kingdom.

You see, it is the born-again people who will be judged by the Lord Jesus at the end of the age. And some of these people will be considered as evildoers. They do not see themselves as evildoers, but the Judge, Jesus, will declare that they are evildoers.

## The judgement of unbelievers

Let's talk about the third question. Seeing that Christians will be judged, then are non-Christians not to be judged? Of course, they will be. The Bible teaches that Christians and non-Christians will be judged. In that case, are the non-Christians judged at the same time as the Christians? Or are they judged at a different time? Is there only one big judgement where Christians and non-Christians will be judged? Or will there be more than one judgment?

That is a good question. In my understanding of the Scriptures, there appears to be two distinct judgments: one for Christians and a second one for non-Christians. When the Lord Jesus speaks about judgment in Matthew 13, about gathering out the evildoers of His kingdom, this judgement is going to take place at the close of the age, when He comes back again. That judgment involves the believers. The second judgment, in my opinion, is found in Revelation 20 where the Bible talks about the 'great white throne judgment.' This will happen after the thousand-year period (Revelation 20:7).

This is what we read in Revelation 20:12-15.

*Revelation 20:12. And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were **judged** from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds.*

*13 And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were **judged**, every one of them according to their deeds.*

*14 And death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire.*

*15 And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.*

Here is the second judgment. V. 12: *the dead **were judged** from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds.* V. 13: *they **were judged**, every one of them according to their deeds.* This judgment involves the non-Christians.

So there are two judgements. There is one at the close of the age, when Jesus comes back, which will deal with the Christians. There is another one after the Millennium, which will deal with the non-Christians.

Here I would like to add a few comments about verses 12 and 13. 'The dead were judged according to their deeds.' 'They were judged according to their deeds.' It is the common teaching of the NT that judgment is applied to a person on the basis of works. What a person has done will be carefully assessed by God. Now, all sin is sin, but not all sin is of the same seriousness. Therefore the punishment will not be all the same. In the judgment of non-Christians, the deeds they have done will be taken into account. But most importantly, the question will be whether they heard the gospel and rejected it, or they never heard the gospel in the first place. Those who heard the gospel will be judged at a much higher standard, because to whom much is given, much will be required (Luke 12:48).

It is my understand that we should not assume that all the people, the non-Christians, who stand in the second judgment will be lost. We are told in this passage that everyone here will be assessed to see whether they are in the book of life or not. It appears to me that some of them, some of these non-Christians, despite the fact that they have never heard the gospel, might yet avoid 'being cast into the lake of fire.' So to the classic question, 'What will happen to the people, past, present and future, who never had the opportunity to hear the Good News? Are they all condemned to hell?', you know my opinion.

## Condemned for failure to do good

You see, not all those in the second judgment will be lost. The same is true of the first judgment. Not all those who were in the first judgment will be saved.

But whereas the judgment of non-Christians is based on what he does, the judgment of disciples is based on what he did not do. What do I mean? Let's go back to Matthew 25. We see that the bad person was severely condemned not because of some evil that he did, but because he actually did not do anything. In the Parable of the Talents, the servant who was described as wicked did not do anything evil. He simply put the one talent he had in the ground and left it there. And when the master came, he returned that money. What was his crime? He was condemned not because he did something evil with the money. He was condemned because he did nothing with the money.

We see the same thing about the goats. What was wrong with the goats? Did they murder people? Did they steal money? That was not the type of accusations made by Jesus. The Lord said, *Inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me* (v. 45). The charge was not that they did something bad to someone. The charge was that they failed to do something good.

Notice the big difference between the first and second judgment. The first judgment, the judgment of believers, uses a much higher standard. Contrary to the human court, God's judgment of believers will take into account the failure to do what is good.

For those who have a deep consciousness of the final judgment, this teaching of the Lord Jesus is a powerful incentive to live faithfully and to do good works every day.