

Judgment Day

Matthew 25 comprises three End Times parables; *The Ten Virgins*, “Keep watching”; *The Talents* “Keep working” and *The Sheep and the Goats*¹, “Keep serving”. These three parables are stark in their distinctions; the virgins were either wise or foolish (empty headed); the servants either faithful (worthy) or wicked and lazy (worthless); and the people either sheep or goats.

The *Parable of the Sheep and the Goats* is exclusive to Matthew who wrote his gospel for a Jewish audience. Each of these three parables has a strong Jewish flavour. This is still pre-Calvary and the Church, that is neither Jew nor Gentile (Gal. 3:28) is yet to be revealed. The Church will unite Jews and Gentiles as heirs together, members together and ‘promise-sharers’ together (Eph. 3:6).

Read Matthew 25:31–46

The parable begins with a gathering of all nations; gathering means the formal assembling together of people for worship, or for a celebration, or for battle. The same word is used for “I was a stranger and you *invited* me in” (Matt. 25:35, 43). The warm invitation to gather is in contrast to the separation of the sheep from the goats. The sheep are separated to the King’s right hand, a place of blessing and favour; the goats are separated to his left and face eternal punishment (25:46).

The basis of this judgment is how we have treated these “brothers of mine” (25:40). The identity of these brothers is unclear. Various views have been expressed; how the Gentile nations have treated Israel; how Israel has treated the Church; or how the Church has treated the poor and needy.

It is vitally important to understand that righteous acts cannot earn salvation. It is equally important to understand that mercy and compassion are expressions of ‘genuine’ Christianity. In this passage the hallmarks of ‘genuine’ Christianity include feeding the hungry; providing clean drinking water; caring for the homeless, those needing clothes and

¹ For whatever reason some writers do not consider the Sheep and the Goats to be a parable. It is parabolic in nature, that is, an illustration for the purpose of teaching truth.

medical care; and visiting prisoners. Preaching the gospel and providing social care are not intended to be isolated but integrated.

There is a clear distinction between the Sheep and the Goats.

<i>The Sheep</i>	<i>The Goats</i>
Take action	Take no action
Show compassion	Remain complacent
Show no partiality	Live only for themselves
Receive an inheritance	Deserve judgment
Declared righteous	Cursed

The Sheep and the Goats teaching begins with the Son of Man coming in his glory, sitting on his throne, and gathering all the nations (25:31–32). This parallels the “Great White Throne Judgment” when “the dead, great and small, stand before the throne and books are opened” (Rev. 20:12).

Read Revelation 20:11–15

The Great White Throne Judgment

Revelation refers to “the book of life” (20:12, 15) and “the Lamb’s book of life” (21:27). ‘Book’ equally means scroll. It appears “the book of life” is a detailed record of a person’s life; and “the Lamb’s book of life” is a list of the names of those people who are permitted into heaven.

The time of the Great White Throne Judgment follows the Return of Christ who is accompanied by “the armies of heaven,” dressed in “fine linen, white and clean” (19:14). The phrase “fine linen, bright and clean” describes the clothes the Lamb’s bride wears (19:7–8). The Lord returns with his bride to rule and ultimately judge the nations.

A person’s entry in the Lamb’s book of life grants entry to heaven. If there is no entry, the book of life provides evidence that excludes them from heaven. There is no Biblical evidence that the Great White Throne Judgment is reversible. Our eternal destination is determined in time.

The Judgment Seat of Christ

On two occasions Paul refers to “the judgment seat of Christ” (Rom. 14:10; 2 Cor. 5:10). Different words are used; the Great White Throne judgment where all mankind appears before the *thronos*, a place of

dominion. The judgment seat is *bema*, a platform where a judge sits and determines judgment, either positive or negative.

Paul describes this *bema* seat as judgment of our service by fire and light (1 Cor. 3:10–15). The fire will test the durability of what we have done; whether we have built with gold, silver, costly stones; wood, hay or straw. The light will reveal the quality of what we have done and our motives. Some will “suffer loss, though he himself will be saved” (3:15).

Does this mean that the Christian has escaped the Great White Throne Judgment? Yes, because the judgment of our sin has already been faced and paid by Jesus at the cross. “I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life” (John 5:24).

But we should not diminish the intensity of the Judgment Seat of Christ; “the fire will test the quality of each man’s work” (1 Cor. 3:13). The results will be reward or loss of reward. The reward is that we have something to offer back to the Lord; “they lay their crowns before the throne” (Rev. 4:10); the loss is that we have little to offer.

<i>The Great White Throne</i>	<i>The Judgment Seat of Christ</i>
Non believers	Believers
<i>thronos</i> – great throne	<i>bema</i> – rewarding dais
Judgment for sin	Judgment of service
Punishment	Rewards

Both judgments follow resurrections. For Christians, the Judgment Seat of Christ follows the resurrection of the bodies of Christians who have died, and the rapture and transformation of believers who are alive at his Return (1 Thess. 4:14–17). This is the resurrection to life (John 5:29). For the non Christian, the Great White Throne follows the resurrection of “those who have done evil will rise to be condemned” (5:29).

Will the Judgment be right?

If the only way to heaven is through Jesus, what will happen to people who have never heard the gospel? Surely it would be unjust to condemn someone who has never had the opportunity to respond to Christ.

When the Lord advised Abraham of his intention to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, the patriarch responds by challenging God’s integrity. “Will

you sweep away the wicked with the righteous? What if there were fifty righteous people there? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for fifty righteous people? Far be it from you to do such a thing, to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the both alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (Gen. 18:23–25).

In a not dissimilar way, Peter was amazed to find himself in a room of "God-seeking Gentiles" in the house of Cornelius. The vision of the clean and unclean animals had at first perplexed him, but then he realised, "God does not show favouritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right" (Acts 10:34–35).

As far as we understand, Jesus is the only way to heaven. But the Judge of all the earth will get it right, and we will applaud his decisions, "true and just are his judgments" (Rev. 19:1–2). It appears that God gives light to everyone²; when a person responds to that light, God continues to give more light that ultimately leads to faith in Christ. If this is correct then God may judge those who have never heard of Christ according to their response to the light they have received.

Hell is the antithesis of Heaven

If heaven is filled with light, hell is utter darkness (Matt. 8:12). If heaven is filled with joy, then hell is joyless. If heaven is home and a sense of belonging, then hell is a sense of lostness. If heaven is a place of satisfaction, then hell is a place of complete emptiness. If heaven is a place of fellowship, then hell is utter loneliness. If heaven is filled with the very presence of God, the hell has no sense of God's presence.

Judgment Seat of Christ Applications

For discussion: What does Paul mean when he says, "a man's work will be shown for what it is" (1 Cor. 3:13)? When we stand before the Judgment Seat, what areas do you think the Lord will examine?

Next week is the final session, Heaven.

² "The Gentiles, who do not have the (written) law, do by nature the things required by the law, the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness" (Rom. 2:13–15).
"God has set eternity in the hearts of men" (Eccles 3:11).

Possible considerations of the Judgment Seat of Christ

1. The attitude of our heart
2. The character of our life
3. The use of our resources; time, gifts, finances
4. Our care for parents (1 Tim. 5:4), marriage partners and children
5. Our words (Matt. 12:36–37)
6. Our participation in God's local and global purpose
7. The social aspect of feeding the hungry ... "Sheep and Goats"