

## PREVIEW

With the disciples thoroughly drilled on the need to be ready (24:36–25:30), Matthew is prepared to resume the portrayal of the end introduced in 24:29–31. There we learned that when Jesus appears in glory, *all the tribes of the earth will mourn* (24:30). The reason they mourn is that they know Jesus' coming spells *judgment*. In the unit before us, which concludes the eschatological discourse, we find an elaborate and provocative picture of that judgment, with *all the nations* present and accounted for.

The material the text presents, found only in Matthew's Gospel, is sometimes called the "parable" of the sheep and the goats. Such a designation is based on a brief parabolic saying in verses 32–33, where the process of judgment is compared to separating a flock into two groups. Quickly, however, this imagery gives way to a description of the scene of judgment itself. The unit is thus more accurately labeled an apocalyptic vision of judgment, akin to the judgment scenes depicted in the Similitudes of Enoch (cf. 1 Enoch 38; 62).

At several different levels, the judgment scene in 25:31–46 involves a *final* judgment: It is final in terms of the narrative of the Gospel, the finale to which the many earlier allusions to judgment point. It is final in the way that it marks the end of the age and renders God's decisive verdict on all human history. And it is final in the sense of the finality of the two contrasting destinies for humankind announced by the One who judges.

## OUTLINE

Gathered and Separated, 25:31–33

Come, You Blessed, 25:34–40

Depart, You Accursed, 25:41–46

## EXPLANATORY NOTES

### Gathered and Separated 25:31–33

As the heading for these verses indicates, Matthew portrays the final judgment as an act of *gathering* and *separating*. Those gathered encompass *panta ta ethnē*, which can be translated either *all the Gentiles* or *all the nations*. The latter translation is better suited to express the all-inclusive character of the judgment in view. Since the good news is to

be preached to every people or nation (24:14; 28:19), all humankind will be held accountable at the end of the age.

The verb for *gather* was commonly used to describe the herding of animals and fits well with the flock metaphor in the scene of separation that follows. It is unclear from the vocabulary in verse 32 whether the division of the flock is into sheep and goats (goats prefer the warmth of an enclosed area at night) or into ewes and rams. In any case, the text draws on similar parabolic imagery in Ezekiel 34:17–22 to depict the separation into two groups that judgment implies. One group is placed at the judge's right hand (the place of favor), the other group at the left (a place of lesser favor or disfavor).

The overarching picture of a gathering of the nations for judgment is found in several OT passages (cf. Joel 3:1–12; Zech. 14:2–5; Isa. 66:18). In these texts, it is God who acts as the ruler of history and executes the role of judge. In Matthew 25, however, it is *the Son of Man* (= Jesus) who comes, reigns, and carries out divine judgment. The imagery of an exalted figure in human form derives from the book of Daniel (cf. Dan. 7:13–14; 1 Enoch 62:2, 5) and is reflected in a number of *Son of Man* sayings in the First Gospel (cf. 13:41–42; 16:27; 19:28; 24:30–31; 26:64). According to Matthew, the rejected *human one* who proclaimed the gospel of the kingdom to Israel, will appear at the end as the exalted judge of all the nations.

### **Come, You Blessed 25:34–40**

The title *king* is used sparingly for Jesus in the Gospels, doubtless because of its political connotations (cf. Mark 15:2–32; John 1:49; 18:33–38). In Matthew and elsewhere, however, it is clear that Jesus is destined to rule on God's behalf in the endtime (cf. 2:1–12; 16:28; 21:5; 25:34; Rev. 17:14; 19:16). Accordingly, Jesus speaks as *the king* in verses 34–46, turning first to the group on his right whom he labels *blessed*. They are so named because they are about to receive the gift promised earlier in the Beatitudes (5:3–12). As Israel was given an inheritance in the promised land, so the blessed in the endtime inherit a place in the promised kingdom!

The distinguishing characteristic of the blessed that qualifies them for life in God's reign is that they are *righteous* (v. 37), which is defined in terms of the six works of mercy catalogued in verses 35–36: They have fed the hungry, given drink to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, visited the sick, and cared for the imprisoned. The deeds cited all exemplify hospitality toward those in need, and all are mentioned in Jewish literature as deeds that commend a person in God's sight (cf. Isa. 58:7; Ezek. 18:7; Job 22:6–7; Sir. 7:35; Tob. 4:16; T. Jos. 1:6; 2 Enoch 9–10; Midr. Ps. 118).

The surprise that the righteous ones register in verses 37-39 is not that they are being credited with such deeds, but that the recipient of their works of mercy was the exalted king himself! “How so?” they ask. In a Jewish midrash on Deuteronomy 15:9, God tells the people of Israel: “My children, when you have given food to the poor, I account it as though you had given food to me” (cf. also Prov. 19:17; Heb. 13:2-3). Along similar lines, Jesus responds to the blessed with the familiar words of 25:40: *As you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.*

The crux of interpretation for the passage is the identity of *the least of these*. In the exposition of the text to which we are most accustomed, *the least of these* are defined as the poor and needy of the world, whoever they happen to be. There is considerable evidence in the First Gospel, however, that Matthew has a much more specific group of poor and needy persons in mind:

(1) The phrase *least of these* recalls passages in which Jesus refers to his *disciples* as *little ones* (10:42; 18:6, 10).

(2) In the only other texts where Jesus speaks of his *family members* or *brothers*, the term describes *disciples* of Jesus who do God’s will (12:46-50; 23:8-9).

(3) Jesus announces in the mission discourse in chapter 10 that those who receive his *disciples* receive him (10:40), and that those who offer a drink to disciples who thirst will be rewarded (10:42).

(4) It is with his *disciples* that Jesus promises to be present in the world until the end of the age (28:20; cf. 18:20).

For Matthew, then, the conversation Jesus has with all the nations in the final judgment focuses on the way humankind has responded to Jesus in the person of his *disciples*, from the greatest to *the least of these*. The scene is anticipated in Matthew 10, where the topic is Israel’s response to the mission of the twelve (cf. 10:11-15, 40-42). Now the setting is a cosmic one, presupposing the response of all the peoples of earth to the universal mission of the disciples described in 28:18-20 (cf. 24:14). As this mission unfolds, Jesus visits the world through his disciple-messengers, who find themselves in hardship and need as they move from place to place. The *blessed* are those who have opened themselves to Jesus by welcoming his messengers and offering hospitality. The *accursed* are those who have rejected Jesus by rejecting his messengers and denying them hospitality.

## **Depart, You Accursed 25:41-46**

The dialogue in verses 41-45 between Jesus and the group at his left is structurally paral-

lel to the dialogue recorded in verses 34-40. Among the common features which we find are these:

(1) Formal words of address (cf. *Come, you that are blessed* in verse 34 and *You that are accursed, depart from me* in verse 41).

(2) Commands consigning the two groups to their respective destinies, which have already been prepared (vv. 34 and 41).

(3) Descriptions of the works of mercy that the two groups did or did not perform (vv. 35-36 and 42-43).

(4) Expressions of surprise over Jesus' assertion that he has been among his hearers as someone in need (vv. 37-39 and 44).

(5) Replies by Jesus beginning with the solemn formula, *Truly, I tell you ...* (vv. 40 and 45).

Although the *form* of the two sections of dialogue is identical, the verdict given in verses 41-45 contrasts sharply with that in verses 34-40. Having failed to welcome Jesus in the person of his messengers, the addressees here are forever banished from his presence (cf. 7:23). The place to which they are sent is a fiery lake designed to consume and destroy all that is evil (cf. 5:22; 13:42, 50; Rev. 14:10; 20:10).

On any reading, the metaphor is a grim one. Note, however, that Matthew's language carefully avoids any suggestion that God has predestined a part of humankind for such a fate. While the kingdom has been *prepared for God's people* (v. 34), the lake of fire has been *prepared for the devil and his associates* (v. 41). It is only by their own choosing that some humans may share the dire future of the forces of evil that oppose God's purposes.

The saying in verse 46 that concludes the account of the last judgment sums up the destinies of the blessed and the accursed, but in reverse order. The resulting pattern of the larger narrative is thus chiastic:

- a. Commendation of the blessed (34-40)
- b. Condemnation of the accursed (41-45)
- b'. Destiny of the accursed (46a)
- a'. Destiny of the blessed (46b)

Hearing language that echoes Daniel 12:2 (cf. John 5:28-29), the reader learns that the lot of those condemned by the King is *eternal punishment*, while the lot of those who found favor with the King is *eternal life*. It is uncertain whether *eternal punishment* implies ceaseless torment, annihilation, or simply total and irreversible separation

from God. *Eternal life*, on the other hand, clearly refers to life with Jesus and his community in the new age God creates, a life in which all of God's promises will be fulfilled, and a life that evil and death can never destroy. On this note Matthew chooses to conclude the text, thereby accenting the destiny he hopes his readers will attain.

## THE TEXT IN BIBLICAL CONTEXT

As the vivid scene of [Matthew 25:31-46](#) illustrates, a theme regularly associated with Jesus' coming is that of *judgment*. Thus James describes the One who is to come as "the Judge ... standing at the doors" ([James 5:9](#)). The author of 2 Thessalonians speaks of the repayment for evil deeds that will occur "when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven" ([2 Thess. 1:5-10](#)). And the visions of Revelation are replete with judgment scenes, including the final judgment before the "great white throne" ([Rev. 20:11-15](#); cf. [11:15-18](#)).

The situation is similar in the OT and in other Jewish writings, where God's presence or coming leads to judgment for both Israel and foreign nations (cf. [Ps. 50:1-6](#); [Isa. 59:15-19](#); [Joel 3](#); [Zeph. 3:8](#); [Mal. 3:5-6](#); [1 Enoch 38, 62](#)). Underlying Jewish and Christian texts alike are the assumptions that God holds humankind accountable for its conduct, and that God will act to rectify the situation when humankind acts contrary to the divine purpose.

At least two features, however, distinguish early Christian predictions of judgment from similar sayings in Israel. In the NT:

(1) The arena of human action which attracts God's closest scrutiny is no longer the political drama of Israel among the nations, but the drama of faith and unfaith as people respond to Jesus and the salvation he brings.

(2) Jesus himself occupies center stage in the final judgment, whether as a key witness in the proceedings (cf. [Luke 12:8-9](#)) or as the actual agent of divine judgment (as in [Matt. 25:31ff.](#)).

## THE TEXT IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH

The judgment scene in [Matthew 25:31-46](#) has not suffered from neglect. It has inspired works of art such as Michelangelo's famed *Last Judgment* in the Sistine Chapel in Rome. It has inspired stories such as Leo Tolstoy's classic tale of Martin the cobbler, "Where Love Is, There God Is." And it has inspired Christian ministries of compassion for the hungry and oppressed, including both denominational programs and cooperative ven-

tures such as Bread For the World, Church World Service, and World Vision. (For a testimony to its impact on the piety of one believers church body, see the sixteen-stanza poem by Alexander Mack, Jr., found in Durnbaugh, 1967:579–582.)

More recently, however, the concept of a final judgment has been seriously questioned. In some instances, the questions concern the way judgment texts are sometimes used—to induce fear as a means of prompting conversion or ensuring conformity to a group’s norms. In other instances, the questions focus on whether the image of God or Jesus as *judge* remains valid. To put it another way: Are the cross and the court compatible metaphors?

The overarching answer of the NT to questions such as these is that *God’s cosmic objective is to redeem and restore*, not condemn and destroy. That is what the cross is all about, and that is what the mission of the Christian community is all about.

At the same time, the biblical writers presuppose that the outcome of the story of God and humankind hinges not only on God’s intention, but on human decision and response as well. History is not simply a playground, where God says at last, “It was only a game,” but an arena of moral accountability, where life choices really matter (cf. Meier, 1980:305–306). The dark side of this reality is the possibility that some will remain stubbornly resistant to God’s reign, unwilling to live within its grace and demands, unwilling to seek justice and practice mercy. That is what stories of final judgment are all about.

In the story of the king’s judgment in [Matthew 25](#), at least two issues call for further attention. One is the question of where the *church* finds itself in the story. If we stay with the interpretation suggested in the preceding pages, we will be inclined to say that the church is Jesus’ needy brothers and sisters. Like the early disciples, we as Christians represent and embody Jesus in the world. But are we really in a position to give that answer? Insofar as we find ourselves in the role of Jesus’ homeless, wandering disciples, afflicted and in need as we serve as Jesus’ emissaries, we may claim the identity of *the least of these*. Such was the claim of Brethren and Mennonites in 1775 when they presented a joint petition to the Pennsylvania General Assembly regarding their peace stance (cf. Durnbaugh, 1967:362–365), and there are occasions today when the designation still fits. One thinks of volunteers who live and work with the poor of Latin America to protest injustice and to build communities of hope.

More often than not, however, the church as we know it in Western culture more nearly resembles *the nations* to whom Jesus’ messengers are sent. We are settled communities who must decide how we will receive Jesus. From that vantage point, the all-

important question to ask ourselves is this: Have we welcomed the radical witness of those disciples who in Jesus' name challenge our usual preoccupations? When worldly powers afflict them, have we stood alongside them in love and solidarity and active care for the needy? *Truly, I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.*

A broader issue to address is the popular interpretation of [25:31-46](#) as a story about serving human need wherever it is found. Here Jesus' brothers and sisters are identified as the hungry and poor of the world, and Christians (along with others) are called to minister to them. It is this approach to the text that has spawned the worldwide programs of service and compassion mentioned above. How shall we evaluate this use of Matthew's story? From an exegetical standpoint, it represents a misreading of the text. Matthew's own agenda in the story is how the world receives and responds to Jesus, not how Christians respond to the world. At the same time, Matthew might not be unhappy with the new frame of reference we have given to his story. Elsewhere in his Gospel, he includes an episode that underscores love of neighbor as the place we show our love for God ([22:34-40](#); cf. [5:43-48](#)). The view that we find and serve God where we find and serve human need thus fits with Matthew's faith—and echoes other biblical voices (cf. [Heb. 13:2-3](#); [Gen. 18:1-15](#)). To put it another way: If we use the text at hand as an appeal to God's people to show compassion to all in need, we are going beyond the immediate story, but not beyond the biblical story!