

Judgments at the End of the Age

by John F. Walvoord

The sermon emphasizes the importance of being prepared for the second coming of Christ and the judgment that will follow, and the consequences of being unprepared.

Scripture: Matthew 25:1-31, Ephesians 2:8, James 2:26

Topics: "Second Coming", "Holy Spirit"

Description

John F. Walvoord delves into the Parable of the Ten Virgins, emphasizing the importance of watchfulness and preparation for Christ's second coming. The illustration of the ten virgins symbolizes the readiness of believers for Christ's return, with oil representing the work of the Holy Spirit in salvation. The Parable of the Talents highlights the principle of rewards given according to faithfulness, illustrating the necessity of serving and using God-given abilities wisely. The Judgment of the Nations following the second coming of Christ portrays the separation of the saved and unsaved based on their deeds, serving as evidence of true faith in Jesus Christ.

Transcript

Parable of the Ten Virgins, 25:1-13

The familiar illustration of the ten virgins, as presented in Matthew 25, is a further effort by Christ to drive home the necessity of watchfulness and preparation for His second coming. An oriental wedding had three stages: first, the legal marriage arranged by the parents of the bridegroom and the bride; second, the traditional ceremony, when the bridegroom, accompanied by his friends, would proceed from his home to the home of the bride and claim her as his own; third, the marriage feast held at the home of the bridegroom.

The illustration presumes that the legal marriage has already taken place and can reasonably be identified with the marriage of Christ and the church already consummated at the rapture. When Christ returns at His second coming, He will bring His bride with Him. The five virgins who bring oil in their vessels illustrate those that are ready for His return. The five foolish maidens, although outwardly prepared, are not really ready. When the time comes for the marriage feast, they are not prepared to enter into the procession and join the feast.

Although interpretation is not given in this passage, oil may be taken here as representative of the Holy Spirit and His work of salvation. When Christ comes to earth with His bride, only those prepared by new

birth will enter into the wedding feast, which seems to be fulfilled in the millennium or at least the first portion of the millennium. Some commentators desire to apply the ten virgins to the church in the present age. The fact that the word then is used in 25:1 seems to refer to the second coming of Christ to the earth.

Although worthy expositors can be cited in support of this view,¹³⁸ it is preferable to interpret it strictly in the context of the second coming of Christ. Actually, the bride, the church, is not in view specifically. Although the Syriac and Vulgate versions of verse 1 read that they "went forth to meet the bridegroom and the bride,"¹³⁹ it is questionable whether this addition was in the original text, even though it is true that Christ will bring His bride with Him. The important point here, as in the preceding illustration, is that preparation should precede the second coming of Christ and that it will be too late when He comes.

What is true of the second coming is, of course, also true of the rapture, and believers today can derive a secondary application of this passage for their own need. In our modern world, where superficial religion is all too evident, this passage reminds us once again that apart from the work of the Holy Spirit, symbolized by the oil, no one is ready for the coming of the Lord.

Parable of the Talents, 25:14-30

The familiar parable of the talents in Matthew 25 is the sixth and final illustration Christ used in regard to preparedness for His second coming. Here, the emphasis is on serving rather than watching, as in the parable of the virgins.

As was customary in the ancient world, the master of the servants was pictured as turning over his property to his servants because he was going on a journey. He divided his property to his three servants according to their ability, giving five talents to one, two to another, and one talent to the third.

A talent was a large sum of money, varying greatly in value according to whether it was silver or gold, and could weigh from fifty-eight to eighty pounds.¹⁴⁰ A silver talent could be worth as much as \$2,000, and a gold talent could be worth as much as \$30,000. With the rise in price of these metals, today the value would even be higher. When taking into consideration that a man's wage in Christ's time was sixteen cents a day, the purchasing power of this amount of money was very large. At maximum, the five-talent man could have received as much as \$150,000, a fortune, which would be worth millions today in purchasing power.

In the absence of his lord, the five-talent man doubled his money. In like manner, the two-talent man also doubled his money. The one who had received the single talent, however, buried his money in the earth and did nothing with it.

In the illustration, the lord of the servants, upon his return, called in his servants for their report. The five-talent man was able to report proudly that he had doubled his money. The two-talent man did likewise. It is significant that both the five-talent and the two-talent man were given precisely the same commendation, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord" (25:21). The principle that rewards are given according to faithfulness is illustrated well in this parable.

The one-talent man, however, had to report that he had done nothing but bury his money. He offered the lame excuse, "Lord, I knew thee that thou art an hard man, reaping where thou hast not sown, and gathering where thou hast not strawed: And I was afraid, and went and hid thy talent in the earth: lo, there

thou hast that is thine" (vv. 24-25). Whether or not the servant's accusation was true, it was only an excuse at best. If the servant had actually believed what he had said, it should have made him all the more diligent. His lord, accordingly, answered him abruptly and denounced him as a "wicked and slothful servant." He pointed out that the least he could have done was to put his money in the bank where it would have received interest.

An interesting question that is not directly answered in the text is why the one-talent man did not put it in the bank. Most expositors are rather vague in their explanation of this detail. The explanation seems to be that this wicked man had the same kind of cunning that Judas Iscariot used when he accepted the money for the betrayal of Christ. Judas had reasoned that if Jesus was indeed the Messiah, his betrayal would not matter, and he would be ahead thirty pieces of silver. If Jesus was not the Messiah, he at least would have the silver. So, the wicked one-talent man likewise reasoned: If my lord returns, I will be able to give him back his talent and cannot be accused of being a thief, but if he does not return, there will be no record that the money belongs to him, such as would be true if I deposited it in the bank, and then I will be able to use the money myself. His basic problem, like the problem of Judas, was a lack of faith.

The one-talent man did not believe that it was sure his lord was coming back. It is therefore clear that his basic problem was that of being an unbeliever, not simply being unfaithful in service. Accordingly, the conclusion of the illustration, "For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath" (v. 29), refers to everyone who has faith or who is lacking faith.

Here, as elsewhere in Scripture, while works may be an evidence of salvation, they are never the ground of salvation. The one-talent man, while deficient in works, was condemned because of his lack of faith. Accordingly, the one-talent man is not an illustration of a backsliding Christian, as no Christian justified by faith and declared righteous by God could ever be cast into the outer darkness. A person who really believes in the first coming of Christ will also believe in His second coming and for the same reasons.

Taken as a whole, the illustrations, which interpret the doctrine of the second coming and make practical application of the truth, emphasize the two themes of watching and serving. What is true for those anticipating the second coming is also true for those who anticipate Christ's coming for His church.

Judgment of the Nations, 25:31-46

The third section of the Olivet discourse begins with 25:31. The first section, 24:4-31, had answered the questions of the disciples concerning the signs of the end of the age and the coming of the Lord. The second section, 24:32-25:30, presented interpretations and applications of the truth of the second coming of Christ. Beginning in 25:31, Jesus went beyond the questions of the disciples to describe the period following the second coming.

Although conservative expositors agree that this is a judgment related to the second coming of Christ, there is extensive disagreement as to the nature of the judgment and its relation to the total prophetic plan. Amillenarians, who deny a future millennial reign of Christ, believe that this is a general judgment of all men that ushers in the eternal state. Lenski, for instance, states, "The whole human race will be assembled for the final judgment."¹⁴¹ Other amillenarians, such as R.V.G. Tasker, likewise picture it as a judgment "of all nations."¹⁴² Postmillenarians likewise agree that it is a judgment of all men. Even Henry Alford, a premillenarian, states, "We now come to the great and universal judgment at the end of this period, also prophesied distinctly in order in Rev 20:11-15-- in which all the dead, small and great shall

stand before God."¹⁴³ Liberal writers, like A. H. M'Neile, agree.¹⁴⁴ These commentaries, however, correctly hold that this is not a parable, as the preceding illustrations of the virgins and the talents, but a literal prophecy.

A strict exegesis of this passage, however, does not support the conclusion that this is a general judgment. There is no mention of resurrection of either the righteous or the wicked, and "all nations" seems to exclude Israel. The conclusion that this is a final judgment is necessary to the amillenarians' point of view, but it is not taught in this passage. Accordingly, if the view that there is a kingdom of Christ on earth for a thousand years after His second advent is supported by other Scriptures, this passage fits naturally in such a prophetic framework, and, as such, constitutes the judgment of the living who are on earth at the time of the second coming of Christ in respect to their entrance into the millennial kingdom. This judgment therefore should be contrasted to the judgment of Israel (Eze 20:34-38) and the judgment of the wicked (Rev 20:11-15) which comes after the millennium has concluded. This passage, more precisely than any other, describes the judgment of the world at the beginning of Christ's millennial kingdom.

The time of the judgment is stated to be the period following the second coming of Christ, Matthew 25:31, "When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory." This judgment, therefore, should be distinguished from the judgment of the church in heaven, the judgment of the wicked at the end of the millennium, and the judgment of Israel.

At this judgment, "all nations," better translated "all Gentiles," are gathered before Him and are described as sheep and goats intermingled. In the judgment, the sheep are put on His right hand and the goats on His left. The sheep are invited to inherit His kingdom, and Christ will address them: "Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me" (vv. 34-36). When the sheep reply, in verses 37-39, asking when they did these deeds of kindness, the King will reply, "Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me" (v. 40). In mentioning "my brethren," He is referring to a third class, neither sheep nor goats, which can only be identified as Israel, the only remaining people who are in contrast to all the Gentiles.

The King will then address the goats and dismiss them into everlasting fire, declaring that they have not done these deeds of kindness. When they protest, asking when they omitted these deeds, the King will reply, "Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me" (v. 45). The passage concludes with the goats dismissed into everlasting punishment and the righteous entering into the blessings of eternal life.

This judgment fits naturally and easily into the prophetic program as usually outlined by premillenarians. The throne is an earthly throne, fulfilling the prediction of Jeremiah 23:5. Those who are judged are Gentiles (Gr. ethne), which, although sometimes used for Jews (Lk 7:5; 23:2; Jn 11:48, 51, 52; 18:35; Ac 10:22), is more characteristically used of Gentiles as distinguished from Jews, as for instance in Romans 11:13; 15:27; 16:4; Galatians 2:12; and is used in contrast to Jews in Romans 3:29 and 9:24.

If the evidence sustains the conclusion that this applies to Gentiles living on earth at the time of the second coming of Christ, a further problem is introduced by the nature of the judgment. How can deeds, such as giving the thirsty to drink, clothing the naked, and doing other deeds of kindness, form a basis for

salvation? Ephesians 2:8-9 makes plain, "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, that any man should boast." The Bible clearly teaches in many passages that salvation is by grace and by faith alone and is not based on works (Ro 3:10-12, 21, 28). The answer to this problem is that works are presented here, not as the ground of salvation, but as the evidence of it, in the sense of James 2:26, where it is declared, "Faith without works is dead"; that is, it is not real faith unless it produces works. While this solves the problem in part, the question still remains whether such deeds of kindness are sufficient to demonstrate salvation.

The answer to this problem is found in the context of this passage. Those described here are people who have lived through the great tribulation, a time of unparalleled anti-Semitism, when the majority of Jews in the land will be killed. Under these circumstances, if a Gentile befriends a Jew to the extent of feeding and clothing and visiting him, it could only mean that he is a believer in Jesus Christ and recognizes the Jews as the chosen people. Accordingly, in this context, such works become a distinctive evidence that the Gentiles described as the sheep are those who are children of God by faith in Jesus Christ.

This judgment, which results in the goats being cast into everlasting fire, is in keeping with the previous prediction of Christ in the parable of the wheat and tares and the parable of the dragnet (Mt 13:24-30, 31-43, 47-50), and is also clearly taught in Revelation 14:11 and 19:15. No adults who are not converted will be allowed to enter the millennial kingdom. The judgment here is not a final judgment, but is preparatory to establishing the kingdom of righteousness and peace, of which many Scriptures speak.

The passage, while not dealing specifically with amillennialism or postmillennialism, clearly gives these views no support whatever. The postmillennial dream of a gradually improving world is not revealed here. Instead, Christ comes to a world that is basically anti-Christ and worshiping a man satanically empowered. A judgment like this does not fit into the amillennial interpretation either, because there is no basis here for concluding this to be a judgment of all men living and dead. It is quite different than the judgment of the great white throne (Rev 20:11-15), which takes place in space, whereas this judgment takes place on earth.

Although the question of whether Christ will come for His church before the tribulation (the pretribulational view) or at the time of His second coming to earth (the posttribulational view) is not dealt with in this passage, the implications are clearly in favor of the pretribulational view. If the rapture and translation of the church occur while Christ is coming from heaven to earth in His second coming to set up His kingdom, and the church meets the Lord in the air, it is obvious that this very act would separate all the saved from the unsaved. Under these circumstances, no judgment of the nations would be necessary subsequent to the second coming of Christ, because the sheep and the goats would already be separated.

The implication of this passage in Matthew is that no rapture of living saints occurs at the time Christ comes to set up His kingdom. This implies that there is a time period between the rapture and the time Christ comes to set up His kingdom, during which a new body of saints, both Jews and Gentiles, is created by faith in Christ.

Furthermore, when these saints are judged, they are not given new bodies, but enter the millennium in their natural bodies, in keeping with the millennial predictions of Scripture which describe the saints as bearing children, building houses, and otherwise having a natural life (Is 65:18-25).

A proper exegesis of this passage, accordingly, tends to support both the premillennial and the pretribulational point of view, even though this is not the main purpose of this prophecy. It is an interesting

fact that posttribulationists generally ignore this passage in their treatment of the rapture question, and that amillenarians who attempt to harmonize it with their point of view ignore the fact that the passage does not state what they read into it.

Taken as a whole, the Olivet discourse is one of the great prophetic utterances of Scripture and provides facts nowhere else given in quite the same way. In it, Christ, the greatest of the prophets and the master Teacher, described the end of the age as the climax of the troubles of earth in a great tribulation. The time of unprecedented trouble will be terminated by the second coming of Christ. The saved and the unsaved will be separated, and only the saved will enter the millennial kingdom. This is the final word, which Matthew brings in answer to the leading question of this first gospel, concerning the fulfillment of the prophecies of the Old Testament of a glorious kingdom on earth. Matthew states clearly that while Christ, in His first coming, suffered and died and was rejected as both King and Saviour by His own people, He will come again and, in triumph, will bring in the prophesied kingdom literally, just as the Old Testament prophecies had anticipated. There is postponement but not annulment of the great prophecies of the kingdom on earth.

It is clear that the disciples did not understand these prophecies at the time. In the few days that followed, they were to witness the death and then the resurrection of Jesus Christ. They were to ask again the question of when the kingdom would be brought in on the day of the ascension of Christ (Ac 1:6). As further revelation was given in the writing of the New Testament, and the disciples pondered the words that they had not understood before, they gradually comprehended the truth that Christ was first coming for His own in the rapture of the church, but then that there would be a fulfillment of the predicted time of trouble. This, in turn, would be climaxed by the second coming of Christ and the establishment of the kingdom. Not one prophecy will be left unfulfilled when history has completed its course and the saints are gathered in the New Jerusalem in the new heaven and the new earth.

138 Cf. G. Campbell Morgan, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, pp. 280-95; A. C. Gaebelein, *Gospel of Matthew*, pp. 225-27.

139 Cf. R. V. G. Tasker, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, p. 233.

140 W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, p. 811.

141 R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, p. 988.

142 Tasker, p. 238.

143 Henry Alford, *The Greek New Testament*, 1:254.

144 A. H. M'Neile, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, p. 369.

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