

# WHEN JUSTICE AND MERCY BLEND

## (A MATTHEW 24–25 STUDY)

### PART 12

The final part of Christ's eschatological Olivet discourse depicts a judicial scene. When the Son of Man returns, immediate blessings are conveyed on the righteous; horror and punishment come to the wicked. This is alluded to elsewhere in many places, e.g.:

1. Righteous: *"And it shall be said in that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, and he will save us: this is the LORD; we have waited for him, we will be glad and rejoice in his salvation"* (Isaiah 25:9).
2. Wicked: *"And the kings of the earth, and the great men, and the rich men, and the chief captains, and the mighty men, and every bondman, and every free man, hid themselves in the dens and in the rocks of the mountains; And said to the mountains and rocks, Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb"* (Revelation 6:15-16).

This is a time of final accounts. Eternal destinies are fixed and personally recognized. Jesus now reviews how that "end" comes about.

### Christ's Glorious Coming

*"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"* (Matthew 25:31).

Some time ago the disciples asked Jesus what the "sign" of His coming would be. In a running description of that event, "clouds" (His vast retinue of angels) would be man's first observation (Matthew 24:27, 30-31).

- That narrative is filled with drama, full of stunning events for planet earth and the righteous.
- It is the culmination of man's most elevated hopes.

That eschatological narrative is here again revisited. But – the imagery and emotion change. Eternal "separation" occurs **that day** for the wicked!

1. This was alluded to in the narrative of Noah's day: *"The flood **took them all away.**" "So shall also the coming of the Son of man be"* (Matthew 24:37-30).
2. Then: *"Watch therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come. But know this, that if the goodman of the house had known in what watch the thief would come, he would have watched, and would not have suffered his house to be **broken up.** Therefore be ye also ready: for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of man cometh"* (Matthew 24:42-44).

Christ obviously feels that it is necessary to talk about this again. The "separation" that occurs is a "forever." Perhaps husband and wife, mother and child, friends, relatives will be eternally pulled apart. No appeal is left – all decisions are irrevocable.

- The judicial implications of the Second Coming are now emphasized. This recalls:
- *“For the Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels; and then he shall **reward every man according** to his works”* (Matthew 16:27; cf. Matthew 19:28).

**“Seated”** on the “throne” is a prophetic judicial expression<sup>1</sup> (cf. II Thessalonians 1:7-10, John 5:27).

- Christ comes to bring apocalyptic blessings to the righteous and judgment to the wicked.<sup>2</sup>

The Savior is not coming as the Son of God, He is coming as the “Son of man.” This is profound – His supreme purpose is to “harvest” His brothers and sisters, His friends, those **chosen**, depicted first in Daniel 7:9 (described as His jewels in Malachi 3:17).

- The angels have no clearly described function except:
- They add grandeur to Christ’s glory and likely will aid in greeting the saints.
- Heaven comes down to *get us* and then we rise to become part of that *glorious family* – forever.

*“And before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats”* (Matthew 25:32).

- This universal imagery suggests the response to the gospel message will be worldwide.

At Christ’s Second Coming the attention of mankind is universal.

- Christ executes each sentence from God’s bar of justice.
- *“For it is written, As I live, saith the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God. So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God”* (Romans 14:10-12; cf. II Corinthians 5:10, Revelation 20:11-13).
- Only two classes remain – the righteous and the wicked.

*“And he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left”* (Matthew 25:33).

- “Sheep” is a common metaphor for the righteous (Matthew 10:16, 26:31; Zechariah 13:7).
- The right side is a place of honor and protection (Matthew 20:21, 22:44; Psalm 110:1, 26:64; 6:13; Acts 2:33-34, 5:31, 7:55-56; Romans 8:34).<sup>3</sup>
- The left side leads downward to the godless abyss.<sup>4</sup> It is the place of “shame”<sup>5</sup> (Matthew 6:3, 27:38; I Kings 22:19).

<sup>1</sup> Aune, David E.; *52B World Biblical Commentary; Revelation 6–16* (World Books; Publisher, Dallas, Texas), 1997, p. 742.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Hagner, Donald A.; *Word Biblical Commentary* (Nelson Reference & Electronic, Division of Thomas Nelson Publishers), vol. 33B, p. 743.

<sup>4</sup> Nolland, John; *The New International Greek Testament Commentary* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; Grand Rapids, MI), citing Plato, Rep. 10:614c.

<sup>5</sup> Turner, David L.; *Matthew* (Baker Academic; Grand Rapids, MI), p. 608.

- The “**goat**” (*eriphos* – G) suggests a hairy animal. In Hebrew *sapir* equals he-goat, *sair* equals hairy. When together, rough, hairy he-goat (Daniel 8:21) suggests something demonic, deceptive or of the devil. This originated with Jacob deceiving Isaac for the birthright (Genesis 27:11), covering his arms with “hair.”
- The **ram** and **rough he-goat** of Daniel 8 are part of God’s key “introductory apocalyptic prophecies” in the final battle between **Christ and Satan**.

The imagery invites a final portrayal of Christ and His people on the right (in eternal right) and Satan’s people on the left (in eternal wrong).

- It depicts “the great judgment scene.”<sup>6</sup>
- “*For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad*” (II Corinthians 5:10).
- It is alluded to in Romans 14:10-12.
- This is also known as the “final judgment” (described in Matthew 13:49).

It is instructive to note that Christ’s labeling of the animals – the sheep versus the goats – is referred to “as it were” in verse 32 but definitive in verse 33.

- Scholars suggest this shows that they were already judged beforehand.
- At Christ’s coming the “great separation” occurs.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Delight of the Saved**

*“Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world”* (Matthew 25:34).

This “king,” identified as the “Son of man” on his throne in verse 31, was earlier labeled by Matthew as the Judge who hands out eschatological blessings or punishments (16:27, 13:41-43).<sup>8</sup>

- Here again He is also Judge
- Figuratively sitting on the judgment seat of God (Romans 14:10-12) or Christ (II Corinthians 5:10).

Christ’s first word, “come,” vividly contrasts with His later command to the wicked to “depart.”

Addressing those on the right are amazing nurturing words:

- “ye blessed of my Father”
  - God has already reviewed each name!
  - That is described in Daniel 7, Revelation 1, 4 and 11.
  - “My” Father uniquely shows that this Son of man also exercises the function of a deity, not independently but on behalf of the Father!<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Hagner, *op. cit.*, p. 742.

<sup>7</sup> Keener, Craig S.; *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; Grand Rapids, MI), p. 605.

<sup>8</sup> Hagner, *op. cit.*, p. 743.

- “inherit the kingdom”
  - God’s review of the “books” not only led to a judicial decision regarding each person, but it gave Christ permission to call us heirs of His kingdom!
  - That’s incredible (Matthew 19:29, Romans 8:17, Galatians 2:29, Titus 3:7, Hebrews 6:17)!
  - Understanding that, we can now claim the great promise that divinity might infuse our hearts and minds:

*“Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation?” (Hebrews 1:14).*

Inheriting the kingdom means “everlasting life” (Matthew 19:29) and finally inheriting the earth made new (Matthew 5:5)!

- “prepared from the foundation of the world”
  - From the beginning of time (Matthew 13:35; cf. Luke 11:50; Hebrews 4:3, 9:26; Revelation 13:8, 17:8)
  - Through these “sheep,” the “blessed ones,” God’s eternal kingdom purposes are accomplished (John 17:24, Ephesians 1:4)!

With the sheep on the right we see Jesus as their **Shepherd** and Priest. With Him sitting on the throne, He is portrayed as Judge. With the declaration to “Come” into His kingdom, He is **King**.

To those saints He presents heaven’s citizenship qualifiers:

*“For I was an hungered, 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” (Matthew 25:35-36).*

- Salvation is awarded to those who were compassionate, with food, water and clothing (survival necessities).
- They are caring for strangers, aiding the sick, visiting the prisoner.<sup>10</sup> (They were no respecter of persons.)

Intriguingly, Christ presents these “services” as though personally done to Himself! All these have been identified as “test service areas” in the past (Genesis 18:1-8; Job 31:32; Matthew 14:16, 15:32, 10:42; Romans 8:35; I Corinthians 4:11; II Corinthians 11:27; I Timothy 5:10; Hebrews 13:2).<sup>11</sup>

*“Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungered, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink? When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee? Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee? And the King shall answer and say unto them, 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” (Matthew 25:37-40).*

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<sup>9</sup> Nolland, *op. cit.*, p. 1028.

<sup>10</sup> Nolland, *op. cit.*, p. 1030.

<sup>11</sup> Turner, *op. cit.*, p. 609.

To the query of “When did we do these things to you?” The answer simply reveals the focused love and mercy towards mankind that heaven enjoys seeing.

- King Jesus responds, “Verily I say unto you” or “truly I tell you.”
- This expression is the introduction mark that what follows is a weighty principle.<sup>12</sup>
- “Verily” is *amen* in Greek. What I’m going to say or have said is established, an unyielding principle.<sup>13</sup>

We are reminded that bearing one another’s burdens fulfills the law (Galatians 6:2).

- Contextually, this issue is the basis for a favorable, righteous judgment (cf. Proverbs 19:17).
- Instructive is the ancient bias of the Jewish people: merits of service related to the importance of the one served. Jesus simply said, “Unto one of the least.”<sup>14</sup>

***Who might be the least?*** Two illustrations enlighten:

1. *“And whoso shall receive one such little child in my name receiveth me”* (Matthew 18:5) (maturity).
2. *“But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed ... Which now of these three, thinkest thou, was neighbour unto him that fell among the thieves? And he said, He that showed mercy on him. Then said Jesus unto him, Go, and do thou likewise”* (Luke 10:33a, 36-37) (ethnic prejudice).

### **The Horrors of the Lost**

*“Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels”* (Matthew 25:41).

The terrifying words “depart from me” are similar to those in 7:23, 4:10 and 16:23 (citing Psalm 6:8) and are as fearful as “I know you not,” spoken to the unwise virgins.

- Jesus spells out the same litany of service issues honored by the righteous but ignored by this group.
- Just before that list is presented, the emotion-packed horror is amplified.

“Ye are cursed into everlasting fire” – there is no hope. The damnation leads to death – by burning.

- Christ labels this “crime” as an ultimate evil.
- That fire is the same as what destroys Satan and his angels.
- **“Everlasting fire”** is for the duration that accomplishes its purpose (Jude 7).

The wicked are eternally identified with Satan. Their “reward” is death (John 3:16, Romans 6:23, II Thessalonians 1:9).

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<sup>12</sup> Hagner, *op. cit.*, p. 744.

<sup>13</sup> *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, p. 332.

<sup>14</sup> Nolland, *op. cit.*, p. 1031.

God's People

Come  
Blessed  
Eternal life  
Companionship

Satan's People

Depart  
Cursed  
Eternal punishment  
Separation

*"For I was an hungered, and ye gave me no meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink: 25:43 I was a stranger, and ye took me not in: naked, and ye clothed me not: sick, and in prison, and ye visited me not" (Matthew 25:22-43).*

Their judgment is also based on **service**. The wicked are indicted for not caring – all ascertained from their lack of charitable deeds. Christ summarizes:

"You did not"  
"You did not"  
"You did not"  
"You did not"  
"You did not"

Sins of idolatry, murder, adultery, theft, etc., are not mentioned.  
These are sins of omission and neglect!

Serving self took precedence over caring for the needy.

"Those who are indifferent to the wants of the needy will be counted unfaithful stewards, and will be registered as enemies of God and man. Those who misappropriate the means that God has intrusted to them to help the very ones who need their help, prove that they have no connection with Christ, because they fail to manifest the tenderness of Christ toward those who are less fortunate than themselves. As Christians, we are to manifest to the world the character of Christ in all the affairs of life. To be a Christian means to act in Christ's stead, to represent Christ. We are not to seek to get rid of the responsibilities that connect us with our fellow-men. God has not placed us in the world simply to please and honor and glorify ourselves. The character of our Christianity is tested by the dependent ones who are around us, who are ignorant and helpless.... Those to whom God has intrusted much, who command the largest resources in doing a good work in behalf of the needy, and who yet have failed to do it, have withdrawn themselves from their own flesh, and have neglected their ministry to God's purchased possession, in order to gratify their own inclination. How does God look upon those who have left the poor to their poverty, the ignorant to their darkness and ignorance? How does he regard those who are willing to let the lost remain the slaves of circumstances which could have been changed in such a way as to bring relief to the distressed? God calls upon men to become Bible Christians, to represent the example given them by Christ. Who can tell what will be the result of a self-denying, cross-bearing life? Eternity will reveal the result of following Jesus, and all will be amazed at the fruit that will be made manifest."<sup>15</sup>

*"Then shall they also answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungered, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto thee?" (Matthew 25:44).*

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<sup>15</sup> White, Ellen G.; *The Review and Herald*, December 10, 1895.

Jesus is still addressed as “Lord” (cf. Matthew 7:21-23). But their words are born out of a spirit of protest and confrontation and justification.<sup>16</sup>

- Of amazing spiritual importance is their single question.
- “*Lord, when did we see you?*” (NIV)

That is the rudimentary issue! They hadn’t known Jesus. They had not perceived Him as their Savior to copy. He was “vertically” a Lord – but “horizontally” not their pattern.

“Christ went about doing good, and when men are united with Him, they love the children of God, and meekness and truth guide their footsteps. The expression of the countenance reveals their experience, and men take knowledge of them that they have been with Jesus and learned of Him.”<sup>17</sup>

“He lived to bless others. Love beautified and ennobled all His actions, and we are commanded to follow in His steps.”<sup>18</sup>

“He did not stand aloof and apart from those who needed His help. He entered the homes of men, comforted the mourner, healed the sick, aroused the careless, and went about doing good. And if we follow in the footsteps of Jesus, we must do as He did. We must give men the same kind of help that He did.”<sup>19</sup>

*“Then shall he answer them, saying, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me”* (Matthew 25:45).

When Jesus responded to a similar question from the righteous, He said that they had served His “brethren” – many expositors say “My brothers and sisters.”<sup>20</sup> Here He deals with the cold facts: “You did not” and the list is given.

The great principles of thoughtfulness, tenderheartedness and kindness are a golden thread that weaves through divine judicial thinking in this illustration. The amazing sensitivity of what this means is noted in these thoughts:

“Let the tenderness and mercy that Jesus has revealed in His own precious life be an example to us of the manner in which we should treat our fellow beings, especially those who are our brethren in Christ. Many have fainted and become discouraged in the great struggle of life, whom one word of kindly cheer and courage would have strengthened to overcome. Never, never become heartless, cold, unsympathetic, and censorious. Never lose an opportunity to say a word to encourage and inspire hope. We cannot tell how far-reaching may be our tender words of kindness, our Christlike efforts to lighten some burden. The erring can be restored in no other way than in the spirit of meekness, gentleness, and tender love.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Hagner, *op. cit.*, p. 746.

<sup>17</sup> White, Ellen G.; *God’s Amazing Grace*, p. 182.

<sup>18</sup> White, Ellen G.; *Our Father Cares*, 128.

<sup>19</sup> White, Ellen G.; *My Life Today*, p. 227.

<sup>20</sup> Nolland, *op. cit.*, p. 1033.

<sup>21</sup> White, Ellen G.; *Testimonies*, vol. 5, pp. 612-613.

The “Golden Rule” is epitomized (Matthew 7:12, 19:19, 22:39; Leviticus 19:18).

- The outcome rests in man’s choice – death that has no end, life that will be endless.
- Moral choices towards man and God are highlighted in Matthew 24 and 25.

### **Conclusion:**

Christ has referenced His Second Coming over ten times in Matthew 24 and 25. This is His prophetic eschatological template which all other prophecies should be measured against. Elevating the significance of this discourse is his imperative to visit Daniel’s apocalyptic prophecies (Matthew 24:15). Together – they serve as a vital end-time unit.

Appealing to urgent decisions are the significant timing prophecies and issues both here in Matthew and in Daniel.

- From signs that tell when the eschaton is near to
- The concept of “one generation” when all will be finished to
- Daniel’s 1290, 1335 and time times and half periods to
- A deep meaning for “day” and “hour”

One is personally left with a heightened kingdom awareness and the stipulations related to its entrance. Christ has been generous with warnings of areas that might bar one’s citizenship in His eternal realm.

With this wonderful narrative, God’s disciples should be equipped to delve more deeply into prophecy, sense the urgent need to be ready (filled with the Spirit) and preparing to finish the gospel commission. A solidarity between Christ and His disciples is anticipated – a bond that will soon be carried into eternity.

Here we have also seen that our eschatological hope is linked with a divine judicial process when He returns. Redemptive hope has concluded. All choices/chances have been “fixed.” The Satan/rough he-goat depicted in Daniel 8 has charge of his flock. The Ram/Jesus (in the same chapter) has oversight of His flock. Through Matthew 24 and 25 is portrayed God’s overview of the end of the “conflict of the ages.” At His Advent justice and mercy will have blended into God’s everlasting covenant of love.

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Prophecy Research Initiative – non-profit 501(c)3 © 2013-present  
*EndTime Issues...*, Number 15, May 2, 2013