
THE JUDGMENT OF NATIONS

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Wednesday, 29 January 2014

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By Jim Jordal

Then the King will tell those on his right hand, 'Come, blessed of my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry, and you gave me food to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave me drink; I was a stranger, and you took me in; naked, and you clothed me; I was sick, and you visited me; I was in prison, and you came to me.' "Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry, and feed you; or thirsty, and give you a drink? When did we see you as a stranger, and take you in; or naked, and clothe you? When did we see you sick, or in prison, and come to you?' "The King will answer them, 'Most assuredly I tell you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers you did it to me.'

Matt. 25:34-40 WEB

Matthew 25:31-46 details the judgment of the nations. In the interests of brevity I quote only part of it, although in its entirety it is one of the most vital passages in all Scripture. You may wish to read the remainder of the account to see what God's decision is for those who fail to consider the distress of people oppressed by calculated, entrenched systems of domination.

Some questions. Does this passage indicate that it is nations rather than individuals that face God's judgment? Can nations do the same things as individuals in alleviating suffering and speaking out in favor of the oppressed? Does God reward and punish nations as well as individuals? Why were the "good" people in this account so unaware of their acts of charity and advocacy?

The common practice of individualizing and spiritualizing Scripture leads one to believe there are only individual sins and that most sin is spiritual in nature, not concrete and specific. The concept of national sin is therefore irrelevant because nations are composed solely of individuals. But God seems to believe in national sin, defined as what happens when the very character of nations changes as they ignore God's clear commands concerning justice, righteousness, mercy, and truth.

I think it obvious that nations can commit the same sins as individuals. They can also practice the same forms of justice, but with one great exception. Individuals can influence others by personal contact or exhortations toward justice. Nations have the advantage of being able to create laws and issue money, thereby allowing them to reach far beyond individuals in either obeying or ignoring God's will.

God also rewards and punishes nations as well as individuals. Consider the throes of Israel during their time of the national formation, first under the judges and later as a kingdom. The prophets made it clear that national obedience merited God's favor, while disobedience loosed a horde of national disasters from weather to war, from famine to disease, and from freedom to slavery. So it appears that God does punish nations as well as individuals.

Why were the "good" people who merited entry into Christ's kingdom so unaware of what they had obediently done? And why were the people cast into outer darkness outside the kingdom also unaware of their evil behavior? In the first instance, perhaps it's because doing good had become so internalized that they never realized the scope of their charitable actions. Doing justice in response to God's freely given grace had become an integral part of their lives and experiences. Therefore they did good as part of their nature.

In the case of those cast away for their ignorant, callused, cruel behavior; we might surmise that they were so arrogant and distant from true faith that they never understood the extent of their sin. It's as Jeremiah said: "Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? then may ye also do good, that are accustomed to do evil (Jer. 13:23 KJV). They were so far from God's way that it would virtually be impossible for them in their present state to perform God's revealed will.

It's a serious matter, folks! It's important to do justice and righteousness, not because we fear of impending judgment, but because of our loving response to God for his matchless favor. God's grace is only free in the sense that you can't buy it, and don't deserve it. It has a price though, which is our glad and obedient response to this freely given gift.