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### **Matthew 25:31–40,46, ESV**

<sup>31</sup> “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. <sup>32</sup> Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. <sup>33</sup> And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. <sup>34</sup> Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. <sup>35</sup> For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, <sup>36</sup> I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’ <sup>37</sup> Then the righteous will answer him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? <sup>38</sup> And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? <sup>39</sup> And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ <sup>40</sup> And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’ <sup>46</sup> And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

### **2<sup>nd</sup> Thessalonians 1:5–12, ESV**

<sup>5</sup> This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering— <sup>6</sup> since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, <sup>7</sup> and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels <sup>8</sup> in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. <sup>9</sup> They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, <sup>10</sup> when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed. <sup>11</sup> To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power, <sup>12</sup> so that the name of our Lord Jesus

*may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

### **Separation from God.**

We've talked in the past about some of the more violent material in the Old Testament, like the invasion of Canaan and the slaughter of the Canaanites by God's chosen people, as described in Deuteronomy, Joshua, and Judges. We discussed the fact that there is strong archeological, scientific, and literary evidence that the slaughter never happened. Ultimately, this might be a faith story, one meant to graphically visualize the fulfillment of God's promise of land to live on, a promise made to a people who didn't fully believe in life after death. The Israelites saw their reward for having faith in God as something that would be delivered entirely within their lifetimes, and so a dramatic faith story like this was very important to them. Most likely, this compelling tale of a million or more people wandering for forty years in the desert and then claiming their land through a bloody holy war grew in scale gradually over a period of centuries until it took on the form it has in the Bible today. The story of Noah and the great flood that covered the entire earth might be based on a much more localized flood that covered much of the Israelites' known world and did not all kill all living things on the planet. In sum, we've come to recognize that many of the stories in

the Old Testament are allegories, faith stories, or tales told from the perspective of a people who only knew local geography and had virtually no knowledge of science. So, we understand that the violence and gore in the Old Testament has to be read in its proper context and not read as if it were a modern document.

But what about the New Testament? There are troubling things there, too, although in general, the story of the life of Jesus and the first Christians is a gentle tale of love, forgiveness, empathy, and importantly, nonviolence. Still, though, let's consider a troubling theme that runs through the New Testament. I've chosen two passages that are representative of this theme. The first is from Matthew, and these are the words of Jesus himself, proclaiming that when the End Times come, there will be people who will suffer for eternity. The second passage is from the 2<sup>nd</sup> letter to the Thessalonians, and it too, describes in very graphic terms the fate that the sinful shall face on judgement day. But is God really that vengeful? Notice that in Matthew, this is what Jesus accuses the sinful of **not** doing: *For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, <sup>36</sup>I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.*' These don't sound like horrible crimes. They are acts of non-action. This passage says that the sinful simply didn't proactively go out and do good things. Is it really that

bad to not visit someone who is in prison? Does this lack of empathetic outreach really demand that these people “*go away into eternal punishment*”? And consider our second passage, where Jesus arrives <sup>8</sup> *in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus*. Not knowing God and not obeying the Gospel isn't a good thing, of course, but it's not like these folks are mass murderers – they are caught up in *flaming fire*! Why the powerful language about God's vengeance?

First, though, I'd like to talk about a sermon I once heard that I think was very, very wrong, theologically. I'm not going to tell you the church I was at or what year it was, but it was a mainstream Christian church. The pastor, we'll call him Joe, was delivering an old school message, one that I heard many times as a Catholic child and one that tended to turn me off to the whole God thing. I believe that this misinterpretation of Scripture is one of the key reasons why so many people have turned away from the Church. Here is how that sermon went. The pastor of this church was very animated. He pointed at the members of the congregation. He shouted, and not for the reason I am shouting, because I'm not using a microphone. He had a mic and a very nice sound system, and I just about wanted to shove my fingers in my ears. He was an older man, but not elderly. He was tall and very serious looking. I'm pretty sure that no one here knows him.

This was a church far from here. He said, or rather he yelled, that the fact that so many people were leaving the Church meant that there would be standing room only among the goats on the left side of Jesus on judgement day. With fire in his eyes, he warned the congregation that many of their loved ones, their siblings, even their adult children, would not be spending eternity in Heaven, that they would be condemned to the fires of Hell for not knowing God, for not believing in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, for not taking care of people who have nothing. The reason I included the two specific passages from Matthew and 2<sup>nd</sup> Thessalonians is because his sermon seemed to be drawing from both of them. The thrust of his sermon was that simply by not having faith, by not belonging to a church, by not living selfless lives that mimic the life of Jesus, people would be condemned to eternal suffering. He didn't say anything about these people being murders or armed robbers or drug dealers or arsonists or having done anything else that we would recognize as being inherently evil. When he was done with his sermon, everyone was hushed, and people left the church silently.

So, back to our passages. We start with Matthew, the Gospel written by a Jew mostly for Jews who were following the teachings of Jesus Christ. This comes from a series of three parables that concern the great apocalypse. This passage, while it seems violent and almost reactionary, actually is very representative of

the teachings of Jesus. Jesus says in very clear and blunt language that a Christian isn't simply a pious person who does no overt wrong. A Christian is supposed to do what Jesus did, and that is value the lowest in society as if they were the highest among people. Giving food and water to someone in need, or giving them clothing, or visiting someone in prison aren't meant to be taken as a literal check list of things we must do in our lifetimes. They are representative of what we *should* do. More powerfully, they are symbolic. In general, we should avoid the corruption and arrogance that was prevalent among the wealthy and powerful of his day – and is even more prevalent today. This passage isn't meant to scare people. It's actually meant to lay out in clear terms how simple it is to lead a Christ-like life. There is nothing magical to it. Be a good person. And yes, do what you know is the right thing when you encounter someone who is suffering.

Let's look at our second passage, from the 2<sup>nd</sup> letter to the Thessalonians. The language in it is more complex and much harder to read. This is Paul, writing to the people of Thessalonica. As it turns out, scholars believe that the 1<sup>st</sup> letter to the Thessalonians was indeed written by Paul, but that he didn't actually personally write the second one. But it really doesn't matter. The letter embodies proper – and compassionate - Christian doctrine, and it was probably written by a follower of Paul and attributed to him as a way of honoring Paul.

Paul – or someone else – wrote this letter in response to the persecution of the Christians in Thessalonica; this was causing them to doubt their faith. The Christians in this city were also guilty of living corrupt lives and of fighting among themselves. The author is attempting to set these people straight, to make them understand what the teachings of Jesus really are – and what happens when you veer away from them. He’s trying to dispel a wrong teaching that has been spread among these people; this teaching is that judgement day has already come and gone, so there is no longer any need to worry about what you do in life.

While the 1<sup>st</sup> letter to the Thessalonians is warm and uplifting, this letter is cold and formal. This is because the author has a serious point to make. The context is this: the true believers in Thessalonica are being tormented by non-believers. They are suffering. Paul wants them to know that yes, things are bad now, but they will receive a great reward in the end. They are to understand that their tormentors will face ruin and pain for what they have done. The author isn’t saying that hey, you people there in the church in Thessalonica, you’re going to burn in Hell if you don’t clean up your act. Paul or our pseudo-Paul is saying that God will one day *“grant relief to you who are afflicted”*. The author is also saying that he, Paul, is quite sure that God will indeed find them worthy. It’s actually a reassuring message, not a threat of eternal violence for those believers who stray.

Let's get back to the wild-eyed pastor who leveled his index finger at his congregation and yelled that he knew people in his congregation who were destined for Hell because they did not know the Bible and they were not mimicking the life of Christ. He was delivering the traditional warning sermon, where the preacher tells people while they are alive, while there is still time to do something about it, that many of them are not destined for eternity in the Kingdom of God. In an old school way, it was meant to be helpful, to give people the chance to clean up their act, kind of like a parole officer telling his parolee in no uncertain terms that he had better not go back to his old life of selling drugs and hanging out with muggers and purse snatchers. But here is why I think that pastor is completely misinterpreting these passages. In our first passage, from Matthew, Jesus is referred to as the King. Here is a quote: *"And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.'* <sup>46</sup> *And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."* Notice that this is God, Jesus, the Savior, who is going to send people away to eternal punishment. Jesus has just told the listener, told us, that we should do what we saw him do in his life. Jesus fed the hungry. Jesus healed the sick. Jesus told his followers to go out into the streets and find the common people and bring them into the great wedding banquet. Jesus said

that the poor are blessed. This passage from Matthew is meant to tell people hey, you just have to mimic me. Do what I do. And very importantly, if people don't do what I do, then God will deal with them. *God* – not Pastor Joe.

As for our passage from 2<sup>nd</sup> Thessalonians, notice that it says that Jesus will be *“revealed from heaven with his mighty angels <sup>8</sup> in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.”* Again, we see the same theme. Live the way Jesus taught you live. All you have to do is mimic his example. And most importantly, leave punishment and vengeance up to God. Notice specifically what that punishment is. It is to be left *“away from the presence of the Lord.”* Separation from God is what this eternal suffering is. These passages tell us to be positive about our faith, and not live in fear. We should mimic the humble life of Jesus. Most critically, it is not up to us – or Pastor Joe - to pass judgement on others. That is up to God, and the real punishment isn't cruelty, it is that God will not be around them. God will avoid them for eternity. Please pray very briefly with me.

*God, let us always live the way Jesus lived, with kindness and gentleness and graciousness. And thank you for not asking us to worry about what happens to those who sin. Thank you for letting us simply be positive, good people. Amen.*