

Boy... the National Football League sure has had some rough seasons lately. ... It is hard to talk about the NFL... and only talk about football. There is so much controversy that surrounds it... and the latest hullabaloo soon begins to dominate the discussion.

Perhaps you remember those first three weeks of the 2012 NFL season... when replacement referees took the place on the playing field of the regular game officials. ... The team owners had locked out the regular refs... because they could not agree on a new contract. ... The consequence of using college referees to judge pro games was... that these replacement refs missed calls... took too long to make the right calls... called too many fouls... and in the process made coaches... players... and fans furious.

The anger came to a head in the third week of the season. An angry Bill Belichick... (coach of the New England Patriots)... grabbed one of the replacement refs and was fined \$50 thousand by the league. ... And on Monday Night Football... the game between the Green Bay Packers and Seattle Seahawks was decided by a call on the last play of the game that was so controversial... the whole country was talking about it the next day.

Confidence in the credibility of the game had been severely marred. Players didn't know what to expect on the field... and worried about injuries. ... Sportscasters routinely used the word "outrage" to describe the reaction from millions of fans. ... ESPN declared, "*Let's cut to the chase—the replacement officials have lost control of the game.*" ... Even an NPR (National Public Radio) blog chimed in: "*It's the talk of the nation today as fans beg for the league and its regular officials to settle their differences so that the 'real' refs can come back.*"

But here is what I find so interesting... if you stop and consider something. Those who care about football... demand to have judges who do their job correctly! ... You might say... “Well yeah... dud?” ... But here’s the point: Despite decades of ethical relativism (“different strokes for different folks”... whatever is good for you – is good for you... and whatever is good for me – is good for me...) - Here in America... we still long for justice and fairness – even if it is for the silly game of football.

There *is* right and wrong... and the referee's job is to assure that *right* prevails. ... (LISTEN!) If we care that much about judges in sports... giving order to our *games*... how much more should we realize the importance of having a supreme Judge who makes the correct call on the *actions of people* in this world...? ... God has given His law to bring order to relationships... to business... and to society as a whole. ... Without God’s moral law... and His judgments that uphold it... life is *chaos*... and everyone is miserable.

Many will say... Well that’s just it! Life *is* so chaotic today... and everyone *is* so miserable... and it is all directly related to the fact that God’s law is being ignored. Will this ever change? Will it ever reach a peak...? Boy! God sure needs to come and restore His order! It seems like anyone who flagrantly ignores God’s regulations gets away with it. (They are not being held accountable for all the misery that they are bringing.)

This must have been (at least... in part)... on the minds of the disciples... when they asked Jesus a question that launched the Olivet Discourse... which we have been studying for the past several weeks... because it comprises all of Matthew chapters 24 and 25. They wanted to know...

when Christ would return... and establish His Kingdom of righteousness. ... We come to the end of the Olivet Discourse in our study today. ... And what comes next in Matthews gospel – is the greatest display of injustice... the world has ever seen... and will ever see – the crucifixion of the long-awaited Messiah.

Matthew's placement of today's passage perfectly fits into the context of what the disciples wanted to know (when will Jesus return and restore justice)... and Matthew's depiction of the ultimate injustice ever committed. It is important for us to know... before we get to the crucifixion... that God will restore His order – and those who are evil... will be held accountable.

And I cannot imagine... trying to keep my head above water... with all the evil that swirls around us today... without having this understanding. (Can you...?)

Have you ever seen what looks like your entire world crumbling before your very eyes... because of the evil of others... (just like the disciples were seeing and felt prompted to ask when Jesus would return)...? *“Lord... we understand that Your Kingdom will be delayed... and we understand that our temple will be destroyed... no stone left upon another. We left everything to follow You... for the sake of this now-delayed Kingdom... and suddenly we also learn – that what we center our Jewishness on – is about to be destroyed... so please tell us when You are coming back... and Your righteous Kingdom will happen...”* The carpet had been pulled out from under them.

We can certainly identify with them. You and I need the assurance that God will restore His order... and evil doers will be given what they deserve...

don't we...? ...So let's turn to our passage this morning... and read how the Olivet Discourse... between Jesus and His disciples... concludes. (We will read this morning's text... in its entirety.)

Matthew 25:31-46

Does anyone get a feeling of uneasiness when reading this...?

Some are uneasy at any mention of God judging people by sending them into an eternal punishment. (Last week we saw in verse 30 that it is described as outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.) ... A lot of people ask: "*How can a loving God send anyone to Hell?*" But Dorothy Sayers put that question into perspective by asking: "*How can a loving God force people into Heaven, who clearly don't want to go there?*" ... The first question ignores what our passage has just pointed out... that these who are sent to eternal punishment... (the goats)... had an **equal** opportunity as the sheep. ... But they chose wrongly for themselves. They simply would not lift a finger... in order to help (who Jesus calls) "the least of these, my brethren" ...and that is what made them "goats."

Now **this** raised what made **me** uneasy... when I first began to study the passage earlier this week. ... I don't have a problem with punishing those who chose to ignore doing what is right... And I don't have an issue with God not **forcing** people to be with Him... when they **don't** want to be.

My issue... is with the **criterion for salvation** that this passage presents. This is salvation by **works**. Nothing is said about faith. The deciding factor for those who receive eternal life... is that they helped someone in need... and those who got eternal punishment did not.

Several of the commentaries that I read... cited James 2:17 in order to explain this apparent dilemma .

James 2:17 (ESV)

So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

The evangelical authors who I was reading (all but two of them) explained how Jesus was describing a person who had the **right kind** of faith (the kind of faith that saves... because it has... or... it produces works.) ... But this did not quell my uneasiness.

James... at least mentions faith. He brings faith and good works together. But since our passage in Matthew completely leaves faith **out** of the equation... it seems like a strong contradiction to Ephesians 2:8-9.

Ephesians 2:8-9 (ESV)

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

Without any mention of faith – at all – Jesus and the Apostle Paul... seem to be in contradiction. ... (Let's be honest)... without any mention of faith - at all - ... our passage here in Matthew leaves far too much for the reader to assume on his/her own... That is... if the vast majority of my commentary-authors are correct. (Now... I know that a believer who reads Scripture is never left to his/her own... because they always have the Holy Spirit... Who can lead them to the truth. But often the text we are reading provides some kind of clue. ... I don't see one here.) ... Furthermore... I really don't think Jesus' original listeners (who didn't yet have the Holy Spirit... or James' letter yet) would have understood it that way.

Remember Jesus was having a discussion with His disciples here. We have to start interpreting any passage of Scripture by attempting to gain an understanding of how the original audience would have understood it. (That is Bible interpretation 101.)

I have a difficult time believing that Jesus' disciples would have made the same conclusions that most commentators come to... because of their having James 2:17. ... But I have far more difficulty believing that Jesus and Paul were contradicting one another. ... So let's try to resolve this by starting with the mindset of Jesus' original hearers – His disciples.

Remember what began the Olivet Discourse? ... The disciples concern about the destruction of the Temple (the symbol of everything Jewish)... and how it fits with the return of Jesus to finally set up His Righteous Kingdom. ... And throughout the entire discourse... I have been showing you how Jesus' reply to them relates to their concern. We saw how Jesus discussed Jewish persecution - in particular - during the period of the Tribulation... and then we saw Christ assure them... that even though they were in for some tough times – they would in no way... be completely wiped out.

Only a small part of the Olivet Discourse deals with matters of the Church... Instead it is almost entirely Jewish in nature. (We don't have time... here at the end of it... to go back through and look at clear evidences of this. ... Trust me... or go back and listen to the recordings of prior messages.)

So as Christ answers His disciples' concerns about their nation (or their ethnic race)... Jesus tells them about the coming horrific persecution... and

the survival of some who will make it through. THEN... He shows them... that He will return. (At the beginning of chapter 25... Jesus detoured – just a little – in order to tell them how they should wait for His return... or... what they need to be doing.) Now He comes back to the event of His return. We are at that point... with our passage today. When Jesus comes back... He will judge.

Who will he judge? ... Who is this judgment for... that our passage today discusses? ANSWER: In the context of this Olivet Discourse – it is a judgment of the survivors of the Tribulation.

Let me remind you that Jesus returns at the end of the tribulation.

Matthew 24:29-30

Then - immediately upon His return – as we read in today's passage... the judgment we just read about... will happen.

Matthew 25:31-32

So... Jesus is judging the survivors of the Tribulation... right here in the judgment we just read about in Matthew 25. The Church has already been taken out of the world before this judgment. This is not a judgment for you and I... if you are a believer. We were saved by grace through faith (just as Paul wrote.)

For those who make it through the Great Tribulation... this is a judgment to determine who (among those who survive)... get to live on... into the 1,000 year reign of Christ on earth... (which we call the Millennium.) This will be the postponed Kingdom... which the disciples were asking about. And these sheep will be the surviving earthly human beings... who we will

help rule over in Christ's administration. (Last week... in the verses just prior to today's... we saw **how** it will be determined just how much responsibility we will be given in Christ's new administration. – We saw this when we studied the parable of the talents.)

So Jesus is the judge that we see in Matthew 25. And those who are judged... are the survivors of the Great Tribulation. ... But who are "*the least of these, my brethren*"... as Jesus calls them... (Who are those that the sheep **provide** for... and the goats **ignore**?)

Let's (once again) try to understand it as the original audience of Jesus (the disciples) would have. ... Who has the Olivet Discourse been – primarily – about...? Who were the disciples concerned about and who did Jesus focus on as He described the coming tribulation...? Who did Jesus assure His disciples... that even though they would suffer greatly... would in **no way** (don't even think about it)... be entirely wiped out...?

The Jewish people! (Jesus even says "my brethren." Jesus was Jewish. They **are** His brethren.)

Do I have any **other** evidence that "*the least of these*" are **Jewish** people who will be tortured during the Great Tribulation...? ... Yes! (Not that I need any **more** evidence... because **context** has such credibility on its own...) ... But turn with me to...

Joel 3:1-3

This prophecy wasn't fulfilled after the Jews were freed from their Babylonian captivity. When they returned from Babylon... God restored the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem... similar to how verse one reads... But God did **not** gather all the nations at the Valley of Jehoshaphat... to judge

them for how they mistreated Israel. So God's infallible Word here (Joel 3:1-3) is about a time that is yet **future**.

God will gather all the nations and judge them for how they treated the Jews... during a time... when they will be horribly persecuted. Hmmm... Kinda' sounds like our passage of study today... (I am very **confident** that it is!)

Joel declared that Jesus will gather them at the Valley of Jehoshaphat. Do you know what that is...? It is another name for "Harmageddon." ... The very place where the Campaign of Armageddon will be the same place where the survivors of the Tribulation will be judged. It is between the Mt. of Olives (where Jesus was talking to His disciples)... and Jerusalem.

Jesus will return... and defeat Satan and his armies... and at that spot judge everyone who is still alive. The Greek word for "nations" is the same word that is translated into English as "gentiles." All the gentiles (every non-Jew) will be judged. The basis for that judgment will be anti-Semitism or pro-Semitism.... Sins of **commission** as well as **omission** against Israel.

Part of the Olivet Discourse was about the Jews having to flee their homes in haste... drop everything and run! They will run to a special hiding place in the desert that God will prepare for them. (Revelation 11 tells of this in greater detail.) But in Matthew 24... it is noted what a hardship this will be.

Matthew 24:15-22

Gentiles who assist them during this hardship... risking their own welfare... (like those who assisted the Jews during the Holocaust of WWII)... will get to live on... into the Millennium.

Although our passage today is about a judgment that will **not** be for Christians who are alive today... and the basis of the judgement will not be the same basis for which we will be judged... allow me to point out how we are not exactly off the hook...

You and I... are similar to the sheep who come through the Tribulation... in this way... They and us... must have evidence of Christ's character in our lives. If He lives inside of us... and He **does** live in everyone who is a believer... then it is inevitable that the character of Jesus will shine through us... in the way we live and conduct ourselves... particularly in relationship to those who are in trouble... and less privileged than ourselves.

1 John 3:16-18 (ESV)

By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.

Good works are not the cause of salvation but they are the inevitable consequence. When a person is in a right relationship with God they will do good works... for this is the purpose of their salvation! ... It is that we might be restored to the quality of life for which God originally created man.

Paul makes clear, 'For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast' (Eph. 2:8-9). About this we need not be in doubt... but Paul's statement does not end there. He continues, '*For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do*' (Eph. 2.10).

Even though this judgment is not about us... we should be thankful for Christ's teaching here. A right application of our passage today... is that we would allow it create a discomfort that will keep us pressing on. Our Lord knows that we all want to sit down and relax on the comfortable couch of Christian contentment... and so he has placed these pointed prophetic rocks in the cushions to keep us up and to keep us going. We cannot miss being impacted by what Christ loves. If we love Him... we will love what He loves. Christ loves the act of reaching out to those who are in need.