

Matthew 25:31-46: Do Unbelievers go to Hell because they Lack Good Works?

Ricardo Campos, Elder Grace Chapel, Orange, CA August 6, 2008

I Introduction

Matthew 25:31-46 seems to say that unbelievers end up in hell because they lack good works. However, when seen in its entire context, this passage reveals that unbelievers fail to enter the **Millennium** because they did not help believers during the Tribulation.

II *The Underlying Context: the Tribulation and Believers' Faithfulness to their Lord*

A. The Events of the Tribulation and how Believers Respond

1. **24:1-3**, the disciples are impressed with the Temple buildings, but Jesus sobers their impression—no building will remain standing. Then privately they ask Him two questions: (1) when will these things be? and (2) what's the sign of Your coming and the end of the age?
2. **24:4-8**, Jesus warns about many false Messiahs, wars and rumors of wars, famine, pestilence, and earthquakes, but the end is not yet.
3. **24:9-13**, this reveals the response of believers during the Tribulation when they are severely persecuted. Some will turn on each other and grow cold. But the Lord will save (keep alive) those who are faithful. Unfaithful believers will die.
4. **24:14**, once the gospel is preached worldwide, then the end comes.
5. **24:15-16**, Jesus warns them to flee once they see the "abomination of desolation" spoken of by Daniel.
6. **24:17-22**, it's important to flee because the Tribulation will be a time of great trial and affliction.
7. **24:23-28**, Jesus warns of the false Messiahs and prophets that will deceive many. So He warns believers not to fall prey to their deception because no one knows when He's coming, except the Father, 24:36.
8. **24:29-31**, Jesus answers the 2nd question first, regarding the sign of His coming and the end of the age. This is the end of the Tribulation, which is the setting for the judgment of the sheep and goats in 25:31-46.
9. **24:32-35**, His disciples must realize that when all these things take place, it, i.e., the Kingdom/end of this age, is near.
10. **24:36-39**, Jesus answers the 1st question about the timing of His Coming. Only the Father knows and it will be as sudden as Noah's Flood.
11. **24:40-41**, the context is His Second Coming, so this is a veiled reference to the Rapture. His Coming will be a surprise like Noah's Flood. Thus, the man and woman taken are believers and the ones left behind are unbelievers.

12. **24:42-44**, since His Coming will be a surprise, Jesus warns them to be vigilant.
13. **24:45-51**, this is prior to the Tribulation. When the Rapture happens, they must be ready. What kind of believer will you be when He comes for you, Faithful, 24:46, or unfaithful, 24:49?
14. **25:1-13**, the 10 virgins represent Tribulation believers. Believers who are faithful survive the Tribulation. Unfaithful believers will die according to 24:13.
15. **25:14-30**, this is prior to the Tribulation. The evaluation by their Lord is likely the Judgment Seat of Christ where all believers are judged for their faithfulness or lack thereof, 1 Cor. 3:13. The “outer darkness” and “weeping and gnashing of teeth” is not a reference to hell, but the same thing Matthew mentions in 22:13 in the Parable of the Wedding Feast. These individuals are in the kingdom, but they’re excluded from the Feast.

III The Judgment of the Sheep and the Goats: 25:31-46

A. The Events at the end of the Tribulation

1. **25:31-33**, Jesus introduces the judgment He will render at His coming. The judgment will be of all the nations who are divided into sheep and goats
2. **25:34-40**, the sheep (faithful believers) get rewarded for being faithful as they enter the Millennium. Note that they **inherit** the kingdom, not enter it.
3. **25:41-45**, the goats (unbelievers) get sent to hell because they didn’t assist persecuted believers. But this is not the final judgment of Rev. 20:11-15.
4. **25:46**, Jesus gives a summary of the judgment: goats go into everlasting punishment and sheep into eternal life, which means into the Millennium handsomely rewarded.

IV Conclusion

- The judgment of the unbelievers is a “preliminary hearing” because the final judgment, i.e., the Great White Throne, happens after the Millennium, Rev. 20:11-15. From the context this judgment is to see who gets into the Millennium, not permanent residence in heaven or hell.
- The believers judged go into the Millennium, not heaven. Thus, in 25:46 the believers going “into eternal life” are not going into heaven, but the Millennium handsomely rewarded; they **inherit** the kingdom, not enter it, 25:34.
- Had these goats (unbelievers) aided the persecuted believers in the Tribulation, they would have entered the kingdom/Millennium, not heaven. Since the goats have no ground for entering kingdom, they go to the only place they can, hell, where they await the final judgment. If they were saved, they could appeal to the King and say: “Wait, I believed in you; you can’t send me there!”
- Only faithful believers (except for martyrs) and unbelievers (that weren’t killed) survive the Tribulation and are judged at this judgment. Unfaithful believers were killed as 24:13 shows.