

# When the Tables are Turned

Matt. 25:31-46

**Intro.** “Turning the tables” is an idiom that is probably familiar to many of us. It means to gain the advantage over someone who until now has had the advantage over you. It’s a metaphor for a comeback...a turn around. Don’t you love it when an underdog orchestrates a come-from-behind victory over a top contender...especially when they happen to be the Detroit Lions or Tigers? Turning the tables has often been associated with Backgammon, one of the oldest games in the world. But the idiom also relates to a social grace. Picture a situation where friends are gathered around a table or seated around a room...like a Life Group meeting. The group leader notices that friends to his left are doing all the talking and those on his right are left out of the conversation. The leader may deliberately redirect the conversation to his right to include those who are left out. The Oxford dictionary says this courtesy may also be described as turning the table. This morning I want to consider the coming day when God will dramatically turn the tables on humanity. Jesus will be exalted and God’s per-secuted people will gain the advantage. Those doing so much talking today will be silenced.

## 1. Heaven’s King Judged by humanity

Today we remember that day when Jesus was presented to Israel as Messiah and King. Palm Sunday and the days following were days of decision for Israel. Many in the crowd coming to Jerusalem for Passover were flush with Messianic fever. They were ordinary folk...the working poor. They witnessed the miracles Jesus performed. Their hearts were strangely stirred by His teachings. They hoped He was the One to deliver them from Rome and bring in their long-awaited kingdom. Forming a spontaneous parade, the crowd waved palm branches and spread their cloaks on the road as Jesus rode a donkey’s colt that had never before been ridden.

Like an antiphonal choir, they cried out, **Hosanna to the son of David. (Hosanna means save now...)** **Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord. Blessed is the King of Israel.** The religious leaders were indignant when they heard this. Their determination about Jesus had already been made. Within the week, praise was forgotten and the nation turned its back on Jesus. Instead of blessing Him, they shouted, **Take him away! Take him away! Crucify him!...We have no king but Caesar.** When given the option of releasing Jesus or a notorious criminal, they chose Barabbas, a murderer. When Pilate asked what they wanted him to do with Jesus, the crowd shouted, **Crucify Him, Crucify Him. Mk. 15:15 says, Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged, and handed Him over to be crucified.**

After His crucifixion, resurrection and ascension, Peter reminded Israel of the godless choice the nation made when they disowned and crucified Jesus. He said, **You handed Him over to be killed, and you disowned Him before Pilate, though he had decided to let Him go. You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. You killed the author of life, but God raised Him from the dead. We are witnesses of this. - Acts 3:13b-15**

But Jesus was on trial long before His final week on earth. Herod tried to have Him killed at birth. From the beginning of His public ministry, Jesus was on trial everywhere He went. The people of His hometown decided against Him and tried to push Him over a cliff. **(Lk. 4:28-30)** The religious leaders hated Jesus from their earliest encounters with Him. They labeled Him **a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners. (Matt. 11:19)** (By the way, aren’t you glad Jesus is a friend to sinners?) As he went around doing good Israel’s leaders were enflamed with jealousy because He attracted so large a following. They were convinced Jesus was a false teacher and a trouble-maker who had to be eliminated. The worlds’ judgment of Jesus is summarized in **Jn. 1:10, 11 - He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize Him. He came to that which was His own, but His own did not receive Him.**

Think of the irony...the Creator of everything was here. Though He came with good will and words of life, people refused to recognize or receive Him.

And these godless opinions about Jesus didn't end after His ascension. He prepared His followers for how they too would be rejected and mistreated. He said, **If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. - Jn. 15:18** This is exactly what church history reports. In every generation, Christians have been marginalized / hated / persecuted / and martyred. Though it's hard to conceive, it is reported that *"nearly one million Christians have been martyred in the last decade alone."* That's one Christian martyred every 6 minutes! In every century since the first one, critics of Jesus have boldly declared their unbelieving judgments about Jesus Christ. Let me mention just a few examples.

- Judaism continues to be unbelieving and critical of Jesus' claims of Messiahship and His identification as the "Son of God." They reject the witness of the New Testament.
- In the latter half of the first century and beyond, Jewish and pagan opponents of Christianity argued that the miracles and exorcisms of Jesus and His followers were the result of magic.
- Celsus, a 2<sup>nd</sup> century Greek philosopher and opponent of early Christianity, mounted a wide criticism against Jesus as the founder of the Christian faith. He discounted or disparaged Jesus' ancestry / conception / birth / childhood / ministry / death / resurrection / and continuing influence. He claimed that Jesus was the bastard child of the Roman soldier Pantera.
- The 19<sup>th</sup> century philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, explicitly condemned Jesus as a mere mortal who was misguided...the antithesis of a true hero.
- In the last century Bertrand Russell accused Jesus of having a vindictive nature which was a clear defect in his moral character.
- Every cult since the emergence of second century Gnosticism has denied His deity.
- According to the widely published Jesus Seminar, Jesus was an "insipid eccentric."

The list of harsh judgments made against Jesus goes on and on. This opposition comes as no surprise to God. Through Peter the Lord said, **But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them--bringing swift destruction on themselves. Many will follow their shameful ways and will bring the way of truth into disrepute. - II Pet. 2:1, 2.** The real tragedy is the multitudes influenced and led to Hell by so many false ideas. The same Jesus who was doubted / disbelieved / hated / rejected / and crucified...continues to be on trial in the court of human opinion. In this new age of tolerance and religious diversity Jesus is OK...so long as we keep Him to ourselves. It's completely unacceptable to suggest that Jesus stands alone as the only way to God!

One of the most astounding miracles of all time is the fact that God patiently stands by while this opposition and hostility runs its course. The sovereign God who created / owns / and controls everything has allowed His only begotten Son to be mocked and put on trial these many centuries! Heaven didn't intervene when Jesus was falsely accused / beaten / and crucified. Still today, Heaven seems indifferent to the suffering and martyrdom of Christ's followers. The loving patience and mercy of God is beyond astounding! Yet many wonder if tables will ever turn? Will Christ and His followers ever be vindicated? With the martyrs in heaven we wonder, **"How long, Lord?"** In **Acts 3:21** Peter answers that question. He said, **He (Jesus) must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets.**

Speaking of this present time when Christ is ridiculed and His people are persecuted, Peter wrote, **For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the out-come be for those who do not obey the gospel of God? - I Pet. 4:17**

These verses anticipate a time when God will dramatically and decisively turn the tables. For the time being, Heaven's king stands on trial before humanity. Every human being is given opportunity to consider the claims of Jesus while God's Spirit conducts His convicting ministry in hearts. But a day is coming when the tables will turn and humanity will be judged by Heaven's King. **Matt. 24** describes the period leading up to Christ's return and **Matt. 25** ends with the universal judgment that will take place when He comes.

As we consider this passage, we need to get real about something. Contemporary thoughts about Jesus tend to emphasize His mercy / love and grace. Many prefer a Jesus who is meek and manageable...a Jesus who makes no demands and certainly would never judge mankind or send anyone to Hell. Downplayed is the fact that Jesus is holy / righteous / and just. Though Jesus delights in mercy, His righteousness demands a day of reckoning. His justice demands that sin be punished and wrongs be made right. John MacArthur writes, *"No one in Scripture spoke more about judgment than Jesus."* Because His coming kingdom is righteous, sin and sinners must be weeded out first.

Those who prefer a "gentle Jesus meek and mild" should revisit the Book of Revelation. There in a vision God gave him, the Apostle John saw the resurrected Christ coming in the clouds. **Rev. 1:13-17** says **...among the lampstands was someone "like a son of man," dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance. When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead.**

When Jesus returns, He won't come as a suffering servant. He will come as the righteous King who will judge humanity with penetrating insight. Every secret will be exposed. **Heb. 4:13** says, **Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.** Palm Sunday's gentle donkey will be exchanged for a white stallion...a war horse. Instead of a rag tag crowd waving palm branches, Jesus will come with the armies of heaven. John was given a vision of this glorious return. **Rev. 19:11-15 - I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God. The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. "He will rule them with an iron scepter." He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.** Meek and lowly?... Passive and tolerant? I'm thinking, NOT!

The fact that universal judgment has been entrusted to Jesus is declared in **Jn. 5:22, 23 - Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him.** Because the day when God turns the tables is so certain, Paul warned the men of Athens to get ready for it. He said, **"In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now He commands all people everywhere to repent. For He has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead."** - **Acts 17:30, 31** So, with the minutes remaining, let's turn to **Matt. 25:31** to consider the universal judgment that will take place when Jesus Christ returns to earth.

## 2. Humanity Judged by Heaven's King – **Matt. 25:31-46**

- **The time / place / and subjects of this judgment - 31-32a - "When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, He will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him,**

v. 31 states the *time* of this judgment. It will happen, **when the Son of Man comes in His glory and all the angels with Him. 24:29, 30** says, "Immediately after the distress of those days "'the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.' "At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. So this judgment will take place when Jesus returns after the Tribulation.

The *place* where this judgment will happen is also specified in the Bible but not here in Matthew's Gospel. The prophets Zechariah and Joel describe the great battle of Armageddon. Nations normally at odds with each other will unite in a failed attempt at preventing Christ's return. **Zech. 14:3, 4** says, **Then the LORD will go out and fight against those nations, as he fights in the day of battle. On that day his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem, and the Mount of Olives will be split in two from east to west, forming a great valley, with half of the mountain moving north and half moving south.** When this battle has ended, earth's armies will be neutralized and the judgment of the nations will commence. **Joel 3:1, 2** says, 'In those days and at that time, when I restore the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem, I will gather all nations and bring them down to the Valley of Jehoshaphat. There I will enter into judgment against them concerning my inheritance, my people Israel, for they scattered my people among the nations and divided up my land. The Valley of Jehoshaphat is the large expanse between Jerusalem and the Mount of Olives. Today it's called the Kidron Valley. As Jesus spoke to His disciples from the Mt. of Olives, it's not hard to imagine Jesus pointing westward toward this valley. So the *place* is the supernaturally enlarged expanse called the **Valley of Jehoshaphat** just west of the Mt. of Olives.

The *subjects* of this judgment are also named. Just as **Joel** prophesied, Jesus said **All the nations will be gathered before Him.** The heavenly throne where Christ is seated today will descend and come down to the earth. The survivors of the Tribulation will be gathered to stand before Jesus.

But what judgment is this? When the Scriptures are carefully studied, at least three future judgments emerge. These judgments differ in time / place / subjects involved / and results.

- The first judgment is called the **Judgment Seat of Christ**. This judgment will take place in heaven immediately after the Church is raptured. The purpose has nothing to do with sin but will serve to reward the faithful lives and service of those saved during the Church Age.
- The second judgment is the **Judgment of the Nations** described here in **Matt. 25**. This judgment will take place on earth when Christ returns. By this judgment the Lord will separate believing survivors of the Tribulation from unbelieving survivors. The believing will enter the kingdom, the unbelieving will be destroyed and sent to Hell.
- Then after the 1,000 year Millennium has run its course, the **Great White Throne Judgment** will take place in heaven. This solemn judgment will resurrect and gather every unbeliever who has ever lived. The works of mankind will be judged. The result for all who appear before this Great Tribunal is condemnation or separation from God in the Lake of Fire for eternity.

For those interested, we have more to say about these judgments tonight at 6 PM in the Fireside Room. But, it's a mistake to lump them all together when the Scriptures present such clear distinctions.

- **The separation of the sheep from the goats - 32b-33 - and He (Jesus) will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.**

In the Near East, sheep and goats are often herded together just as they were in Jesus' day. But sheep and goats are not alike. While sheep are docile and gentle creatures, goats are unruly and rambunctious. Because the two species don't feed or rest well together, a shepherd will often separate them for grazing and for sleeping at night. By making certain vocal sounds, a seasoned shepherd can separate hundreds of sheep and goats in a matter of minutes. Remember Jesus said, **My sheep know my voice and they follow Me.**

Because believers receive a new nature capable of doing right, they are constitutionally different from the saved. The **sheep** in this parable represent people who have trusted Christ for salvation. They're called **righteous** because God has forgiven their sin and declared them righteous on the basis of their faith in Christ's sacrifice for them. **II Cor. 5:21** explains the transaction that makes sinners righteous. **God made Him (Jesus) who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him** (or through faith in Jesus) **we might become the righteousness of God.** On the cross, Jesus assumed the full penalty for our sin and sinfulness. Forgiveness / pardon / and righteousness are available to every person who will trust Jesus to save them. At this judgment the Divine Shepherd will put His sheep on His right side...the place of favor and blessing. The **goats** represent the unsaved. They are Tribulation survivors who have rejected God's salvation and have not believed in Jesus despite worldwide evangelization. These are put on His left, the place of disfavor and rejection.

- **The specific test that validates believers - vs. 34-40**

**"Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.' "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' "The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'**

**Rom. 5:5** describes the supernatural transformation that happens in sinners who trust Christ for salvation. Paul wrote, **God has poured out His love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom He has given us.** A born again Christian is a person indwelt by God's Spirit. The Holy Spirit creates in us a new desire and capacity to love others, especially fellow believers...and to love them as God loves them. This desire and capacity to love is a like a birth mark that distinguishes the saved from the unsaved. Jesus said in **Jn. 13:35 - By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.**" Love is the acid test that visibly distinguishes the saved from the unsaved.

Now remember, this judgment in **Matt. 25** will judge survivors of the Tribulation...survivors of the most catastrophic period in human history. The upheavals of nature will cause social and economic catastrophe more extreme than anything the world has never known. Along with massive shortages of basic essentials, there will be hardship caused by privation and persecution. In these desperate times, people will turn on each other. During the second half of the Tribulation, Jews and Christians will be hated and hunted by the AntiChrist. Like it was during the Holocaust when some risked their lives to protect and shelter Jewish people, those who follow Christ will assist fellow believers anyway they can. Motivated by Christ's love they will provide food, water, shelter and clothing.

They will minister to the sick and visit those who are imprisoned. Unaware of what they're doing, they will be ministering to Jesus Himself. They will minister to Jesus each time they serve their fellow believers because Jesus identifies so completely and intimately with His own. Remember when Saul persecuted the Church? The risen Christ appeared to him and said, "**Saul, Saul, why do you persecute Me?**" To lay a hand on one of Christ's followers is to lay a hand on Jesus.

Now we need to be careful to make a distinction here. The **sheep** aren't judged righteous because they love and serve the people Jesus loves. It's the other way around. The **sheep** love and serve the people Jesus loves because they have been made righteous by faith. Their changed hearts are made visible by loving service to fellow believers in need. **I Jn. 3:17** asks, **If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?** These Tribulation believers will be like the wise virgins who were waiting for the bridegroom with lighted lamps. They'll be like the wise servants who invested their master's wealth while he was away. The faith of these believers will be demonstrated by the loving care they extend to their brothers and sisters whether Jew or Gentile. Because these people are saved by His grace, Jesus said, **take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.** Without dying, they will enter Christ's kingdom in renewed physical bodies.

- **The specific test that disqualifies the unsaved - vs. 41-46**

**"Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.' "They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?' "He will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.' "Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."**

Those consigned to Christ's left are **goats**...the unrighteous. Because they have not believed in Jesus, they're like the foolish virgins whose lamps were without oil. They're like the unwise servant who squandered his master's wealth. They have neither the Holy Spirit nor the gifting of God's love. Written to believers, **Rom. 8:9** says, **You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ.** Like each of us prior to salvation, their lives are oriented by self-love more than compassion for others. They are unmoved by the suffering of Jews and Christians. Unlike the righteous, they possess a fallen human nature. They have no spiritual bond or love for people who believe in Jesus. As a result, they offer nothing to those who are desperate and in need of help. As they withhold their affection and possessions they withhold these things from Jesus Himself. Once again, this is because Jesus identifies so closely and intimately with those who are His.

Can you sense what is prophesied here? God is promising to turn the tables. The Majestic and Holy Messiah the world mocked and denied will return someday. The armies that oppose Him will be annihilated. Christ and His followers, who in the world's eyes seem so pathetic and disadvantaged, will gain the advantage. The verdict will be handed down and the righteous separated from the unrighteous. Those who were so boisterous and dominated the conversation will be silenced. The time has come when the Lord from heaven will speak. **v. 41 - "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. v. 46 - "Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."**

Nothing we've considered this morning comes as any surprise to God...not the world's rejection of Jesus...not the mocking / the denials / nor the persecution of His people that has continued unabated since Jesus ascended. Still today, Jesus continues to be on trial in the court of human opinion while God patiently waits for sinners to turn to Him.

But this God for whom nothing comes as a surprise has planned and promised a day when the tables will turn. On that day God **will exalt (His Son) to the highest place and give Him a name this is above every name that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth...** - Phil 2:9, 10. And all God's people said, Amen!

My first question is this...where will you be seated when God turns the tables and Jesus is universally recognized as King of kings and Lord of lords? Will you be ready and among the believing sheep or unprepared and among the unbelieving goats? This is life's most important question. If you haven't done so already, I urge you to trust Jesus as your Lord and Savior and settle this once for all.

On two occasions Jesus literally overturned tables in His Temple. What was right side up, He turned upside down. He was justly offended by the way His Father's house was being desecrated by the presence of greedy merchants so he drove them out. Jesus had complete authority to do this, because He is, after all, Lord of His Temple.

But here's a question for those of us who belong to Him...to those whose bodies are His temple today. If Jesus was present among us right now, and He is, what would He overturn in your life and in mine? What would His perfect insight expose and wish to remove? Concerning the Church He loves, would He find us all in or dabbling on the fringes? Would He find laziness or enthusiastic service? Would he find godly contentment or dissatisfaction and complaining? Would He find us engaged in worthless entertainment or making the most of every opportunity? Would He find indulgence in sinful pleasure or would He find us pursuing holiness? I urge you to let Him be Lord of His Temple who purges out all that displeases and defiles.