

Sermons on Matthew

The Coming of Christ

Matthew 16:27, 28

With Study Questions

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For _the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father __with His angels, __and then He will reward each according to his works. ⁻²⁸⁻ Assuredly, I say to you, __there are some standing here who shall not taste death till they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom (Matthew 16:27, 28).

Interpreting the Bible Any Way You Want

Famous atheist Bertrand Russell, in his 1957 book *Why I Am Not a Christian*, wrote,

I am concerned with Christ as he appears in the gospel narrative as it stands, and there one does find some things that do not seem to be very wise. For one thing, He certainly thought that His second coming would occur in the clouds of glory before the death of all the people who were living at that time. There are a great many texts that prove that and there are a lot of places where it is quite clear that He believed that His coming would happen during the lifetime of many then living. That was the belief of His earlier followers, and it was the basis of a good deal of His moral teaching.¹

Although I am not convinced for a second that that was the reason Russell wasn't a Christian, he certainly had a good point. I remember having a similar conversation with a Roman Catholic priest who had drawn the conclusion that the Apostle Paul was mistaken regarding the imminence of the Second Coming. His view was similar to J. L. Mays in the *Harper Bible Commentary*:

Matthew believes that the Second Coming will occur within the lifetime of a few of *his* generation: it has been postponed, but not indefinitely.²

Is this our conclusion? Matthew, Paul, and Jesus were mistaken! If that's our conclusion, I say, "Move over, Bertrand."

The way the above text has been treated by many expositors (chiefly in our modern popular culture) understandably opens the Christianity they

¹ Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957), page 16.

² Mays, J. L. (1996, c1988). *Harper's Bible commentary* (Mt 16:24). San Francisco: Harper & Row.

promote to the type of ridicule we hear from Russell. If we were to do with other passages what is commonly done with this passage, the accusations that people interpret the Bible any way they want would reach a new height of validity.

We recoil, and rightfully so, when we hear games played with the Scriptures which deny the actual physical resurrection of Christ or genuine display of miracles. Orthodox Christians legitimately reject the notion that our eternal life is merely a frame of mind or that a person named Jesus never actually lived in the flesh. But the people holding these heretical views have Bibles in their hands. A volume of truth is attached to the adage, "If you torture a verse long enough, you can get it to confess to anything."

Respectable Bible teachers—people we would otherwise trust to give an accurate analysis of the text of Scripture—give an explanation here which reveals such a commitment to a certain doctrine that they are willing violate principles of hermeneutics (the art and science of Bible interpretation) here that they would consider unthinkable elsewhere.

John MacArthur, whom I respect greatly, is thinking that Jesus is speaking of the Transfiguration, and perplexes me when he writes,

It seems reasonable, therefore, to assume that Jesus verified the reliability of His second coming prophecy by giving a glimpse of His second coming glory to some of the disciples before they would taste death.³

However one reads the above passage, the words of Jesus give no impression that what He was speaking of was merely a glimpse. He is coming in the glory of His Father with His angels to judge.

The Plain Reading of the Text

The plain, simple and ordinary reading of this text is that before some of the people to whom Jesus is speaking die, He will come with His angels in judgment. The liberties taken with this text might be excusable (but probably not) if the message of an imminent (soon to come) judgment wasn't already a running theme through Matthew.

John the Baptist preached an imminent judgment to the Pharisees,

³ John MacArthur, *New Testament Commentary, Matthew 16-23* (Moody Bible Institute 1988), p.60.

...even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees...(speaking of Jesus) __He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit __and fire.
-12- __His winnowing fan *is* in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather His wheat into the barn; but He will __burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire (Matthew 3:7, 10-12; parenthesis mine).

When Jesus sent out the Apostles, He said,

_When they persecute you in this city, flee to another. For assuredly, I say to you, you will not have __gone through the cities of Israel __before the Son of Man comes (Matthew 10:23).

Earlier in this very chapter Jesus chastises the Pharisees and Sadducees because they could not “discern the times” (Matthew 16:3). Again, addressing the apostate clergy of His day Jesus thunders,

**Therefore you are witnesses against yourselves that __you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. -32- __Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers' *guilt*. -33- Serpents, __brood __of vipers! How can you escape the condemnation of hell? -34-
_Therefore, indeed, I send you prophets, wise men, and scribes: __some of them you will kill and crucify, and __some of them you will scourge in your synagogues and persecute from city to city, -35- _that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on the earth, __from the blood of righteous Abel to __the blood of Zechariah, son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. -36- Assuredly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation (Matthew 23:31-36).**

And again Jesus teaches,

Now learn _this parable from the fig tree: When its branch has already become tender and puts forth leaves, you know that summer *is* near. -33- So you also, when you see all these things, know __that __it is near—at the doors! -34- Assuredly, I say to you, __this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place (Matthew 24:32-34).

During His trial, Jesus says to the high priest,

It is as you said. Nevertheless, I say to you, hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven (Matthew 26:64).

When all this is added to the actual Greek language used in our current text the meaning becomes even more obvious. In the Greek language the order of words plays little if any role in the way the sentence is to be understood. The first word in a sentence is often placed for emphasis rather than grammatical structure. The first word in verse 27 is “mellei” which means “is about” or “to be about to do something.” This is included in many translations.

For, the Son of Man is about to come in the glory of his Father, with his messengers, and then he will reward each, according to his work (Matthew 16:27—Young’s Literal Translation).

For the Son of Man is about to be coming in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He shall recompense to each one according to his manner of acting (Matthew 16:27—The Expanded Translation).

For the Son of Man is about to come in the glory of his Father with his angels, and then he will reward each one according to his deeds (Matthew 16:27—Today’s English Version).

I hasten to say that I do believe the Bible teaches of an actual Second Coming where Jesus will raise all who are in the tombs and separate the sheep from the goats and all will be given new and incorruptible bodies...I just don’t think this text (and many others used this way) is directly describing that event.

Mellei, or “is about” has imminence attached to it. Jesus used the word to describe how He was *about* to suffer at the hands of the Pharisee (Matthew 17:12). Jesus also used the word to describe the cup of wrath He was *about* to drink at the cross (Matthew 20:22). Luke uses it in Acts 3:3 to describe how Peter and John were *about* to go into the temple.

And if this is not sufficient, one need merely look at the next verse.

Assuredly, I say to you, __there are some standing here who shall not taste death till they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom (Matthew 16:28).

In this verse we are not relying on the translation of a single word but an entire phrase which if taken literally: **“there are some of the here ones standing who will not taste death until...”**

The word “some” (_____) means *someone, anyone, somebody* (plural). The plain, ordinary reading of this text is that when Jesus comes, some (but probably not all) of the people to whom He is speaking will still be alive.

It is commonly argued (e.g. by MacArthur) that this is the Transfiguration which occurs in the very next verse (six days later). This is a pivotal passage in our view of eschatology (the study of last things). If we grant that this event happened within the generation to whom Jesus spoke, that pulls a great deal of the backbone out of the modern popular end times model. So the question we must ask ourselves is what seems most reasonable. If I were to say that an event was going to take place and that some of you won't die before it happens, would I likely be speaking of something happening next week or in 35 or 40 years from now? Or 2000 years from now? Is not the answer obvious?

Challenging Words During Challenging Times

Perhaps this whets your appetite for further eschatological instruction, which we will pursue this evening, but for now I would like to briefly give what I believe to be the event of which Jesus speaks and the redemptive element of His message. These were challenging words during challenging times—even though, in principle, the message extends through history. And just so you don't think I'm being too novel or innovative, I'll begin with a brief quote from Matthew Henry, a well respected 17th century Presbyterian.

But this points at Christ's coming by the pouring out of his Spirit, the planting of the gospel church, the destruction of Jerusalem, and the taking away of the place and nation of the Jews, who were the most bitter enemies to Christianity. Here was *the Son of man coming in his kingdom*. Many then present

lived to see it, particularly John, who lived till after the destruction of Jerusalem, and saw Christianity planted in the world.⁴

It would appear here that Jesus is speaking of the destruction of the Temple, the judgment of Israel, and the end of the Old Covenant.

Jesus just challenged His followers to take up their cross and follow Him. He told them they must be willing to lose their life in order to gain it (Matthew 16:24-26). To emphasize the value of the true and eternal life over the temporal earthly life, Jesus moves to these words of judgment.

In this particular time in history, many people were about to die. Christians would enter into a time of severe persecution at the hands of the Jews and Romans and then the Jews would suffer one of the most devastating judgments in the history of the world (Matthew 24).

The Judgment of God or Men

The impact of the words of Christ are heightened due to these events. People would be forced to decide whether they would follow Christ and face persecution and possible death, or reject the words of Christ and find temporary comfort, followed by the judgment at the hands of the Romans which would immediately usher them into the judgment of God. This explains both the imminence of the words of Christ and the subsequent eternal judgment.

In short, when God judges in history due to apostasy, that judgment on earth is directly followed by the eternal judgment, “**_And as it is appointed for men to die once, _but after this the judgment” (Hebrews 9:27)**. We should not think that when the Lord rained brimstone on Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:24), that that was the end of it. The second death (Revelation 20:6), the second judgment, is the one to fear. It is in our current context that Jesus taught,

_And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather __fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in __hell (Matthew 10:28).

⁴Henry, M. (1996, c1991). *Matthew Henry's commentary on the whole Bible : Complete and unabridged in one volume* (Mt 16:24). Peabody: Hendrickson.

A consistent acknowledgment of this imminent judgment followed by the eternal judgment does justice to the text—even though it overturns current popular eschatological models and novels.

Rewards According to Works

What should be of greater concern to us in this passage is how Jesus teaches that He will **“reward each according to his works” (Matthew 16:27).**

“Reward” (*apodosei*) although it can carry the idea of an obligation, simply means to “give away, give up or give out.” The New American Standard translates it “recompense” or “repay.” The American Standard translates it “render”. This is a preferable translation since it is emphatically inconsistent with the entire teaching of Scripture that God is somehow obligated to reward sinful men (Romans 4:4). And even if we did stay with the word ‘reward’ as it is commonly used, the reward would be based upon the merit of Christ alone and certainly not our meager human efforts.

But what of these works?

Works, in this passage is the word *praxin* (not the word ‘ergon’ which is the standard word used by Paul when pitting works against faith—Romans 3:27; 9:32; Galatians 3:2) which means “way of acting, or course of action.” It can be translated “function” (Romans 12:4) where Paul informs the church that they have many members but the same “function.” In this particular passage the word is singular (not plural as some translations seem to render it) and literally could be read that Jesus will reward each person “according to his practice or function.”

Two critical errors must be addressed: The first error is that error which seems common to all cultures, that life is a test of morals and only the ones who score high enough on the test make it to heaven. People go through their entire lives hoping they’ll make it. This was the very burden Jesus was seeking to lift off the shoulders of His followers when He said,

Take My yoke upon you __and learn from Me, for I am __gentle and _lowly in heart, __and you will find rest for your souls. ⁻³⁰⁻ __For My yoke is easy and My burden is light (Matthew 11:25).

No person, either here or in some purgatorial eternity, is capable of bearing the burden of obtaining a level of holiness sufficient to impress God.

__If You, Lord, should __mark iniquities, O Lord, who could __stand? ⁴ But *there is* __forgiveness with You, That __You may be feared (Psalm 130:3, 4).

But there is forgiveness. And this addresses the second error. The second error is that since no one can stand acquitted before the tribunal of God, that it doesn't matter what we do. We should sin all the more that grace may abound (Romans 6:1).

These words of Christ inform us that our behavior or "practice" does make a difference. But we should not think of the practice as a barometer of ethical perfection which somehow yields God's pleasure when it reaches a certain level.

The Christian's practice or function which makes Him pleasing in the eyes of God is His new identity in Christ. He acknowledges the dead-ness of the old man and ceases to trust in the efforts of the old man to please God and views himself as a new creature in Christ.

The Apostle Paul writes that "**if anyone *is* in Christ, *he is* __a new creation**" (2 Corinthians 5:17). He goes on to say that "**God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not *imputing* their trespasses to them**" (2 Corinthians 5:19). When sinners are reconciled to God by faith in Christ God renders unto them the rewards of heaven.

Most assuredly the fruit of the new man in Christ is the basis by which Paul calls Christians to holy behavior.

-But now you yourselves are to put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth. ⁻⁹⁻ Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds (π__-----—praxesin), ⁻¹⁰⁻ and have put on the new *man* who __is renewed in knowledge __according to the image of Him who __created him, ⁻¹¹⁻ where there is neither __Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave *nor* free, __but Christ *is* all and in all (Colossians 3:8-11).

But it should never be thought that a certain level of work finally pleases God. In short, there are those who reject the righteousness which

comes by faith in Christ and continue to walk in the deeds of the flesh. They will be judged according to those deeds.

And there are those who by faith are found in Christ, not trusting in their own righteousness but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith (Philippians 3:9, 10). They are called to walk in righteousness and their efforts are the outward demonstration of a sincere faith. But their hope of salvation is not in their own righteousness but the righteousness which is from God.

Questions for Study

1. Is it possible that the Bible writers were mistaken about when the Second Coming would happen? What are the implications (pages 2, 3)?
2. What do we learn from the imminent language connected with eschatological events (pages 3-5)?
3. What are the strengths and weaknesses of view this passage as speaking about the Transfiguration (pages 6, 7)?
4. How would these words have challenged Jesus' original audience? How do they speak to us today (pages 7, 8)?
5. That Jesus will reward men according to their deeds mean if we're good enough we get to go to heaven? Explain (pages 8-10)
6. What does it mean to be a new creature in Christ (pages 8-10)

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