

God's Justice, Judgment, and Wrath

Matthew 13:47–51

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Introduction

We continue our study of the Gospel of Matthew. Since the start of the year we have been working through Matthew 13, a chapter built around seven parables of the kingdom. Today we arrive at the last of them — the parable of the fishing net, Matthew 13:47–51.

Matthew 13 tells us plainly why Jesus speaks in parables: people are blind and deaf to the kingdom. He does not speak in parables to make them blind and deaf, but rather to help the spiritually blind and deaf see and hear. Matthew 13:34 presses this further, telling us that “he said nothing to them without a parable” — which suggests that what we have here are not one-time illustrations but the very parables Jesus returned to again and again in his public teaching.

To trace the arc of the chapter is to trace the arc of grace. In the first parable — the parable of the four soils — the point is that the Lord is freely scattering the seed of the gospel everywhere, to everyone, but not every heart is prepared to receive it. Some hearts are hardened and do not hear. Some are anxious and do not trust. Some are distracted and therefore forget. But in hearts that do receive the Word, the fruit of the kingdom takes root and grows.

The next three parables deepen that vision of grace. The parable of the weeds shows us a God whose grace *preserves* — He refuses to pull the weeds lest the wheat be lost. The mustard seed shows us a God whose grace *empowers* — the smallest of seeds becomes a tree where birds find shelter. And the leaven shows us a God whose grace *completes* — what He begins, He finishes, working quietly through the whole until nothing is untouched. From start to finish, your salvation is not about your strength or your performance. It is about His grace — unmerited, unearned, unstoppable.

Last week we looked at the twin parables of the hidden treasure and the pearl of great price. Both speak of the supreme worth of Christ and the salvation He has purchased — a treasure so great that everything else a person might own or experience pales beside it.

But the kingdom parables do not only sing of grace. They also warn of judgment. The same Jesus who speaks of mustard seeds and hidden treasure tells us, with utter seriousness, that God will bring a final separation between the righteous and the evil. Grace is real. And so is justice.

Let us pray, and then let the Lord's words search us.

A Word Before We Begin

When I was a teenager growing up in a small town in eastern Oregon — a town of about a thousand people, with five churches that pooled their youth groups together — we spent a great deal of time on an old school bus they had painted green and stenciled with the words *God's Kids in Action*. Because everything in eastern Oregon is so spread out, we logged a lot of miles on that bus, and there was always some youth leader determined to fill the time with singing. One song we returned to often was a round — one side of the bus singing one part, the other side answering — that went like this:

Heaven is a wonderful place, filled with glory and grace; I want to see my Savior's face — heaven is a wonderful place. I want to go there.

Hell is a horrible place, filled with fire and hate; I don't want to see that devil's face — hell is a horrible place. Don't go there.

That song is a fair picture of most people's working theology of heaven and hell. And it is not wrong — heaven is indeed a wonderful place, and I want to go there; hell is indeed a horrible place, and I do not want to go there. But the Bible has far more to say on the subject than that. It speaks of God's justice, His judgment, and His wrath with a seriousness and depth that that bus-song only grazes. And that is precisely where our passage takes us today.

The Parable

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind. When it was full, men drew it ashore and sat down and sorted the good into containers but threw away the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

— *Matthew 13:47–50*

Notice what Jesus emphasizes: the net gathers fish of every kind. The kingdom's message goes wide; the visible catch is mixed. And the sorting does not happen in the water — it happens on the shore. We live in a world, and even in a visible church, where wheat and weeds, good fish

and bad, are often found side by side. But Jesus promises a day when God will bring perfect, final clarity. His justice, His judgment, and His wrath will come. Let us take each of these in turn.

Justice

Here is a question that troubles many people: if there is a good God who is all-powerful, why is life so unfair?

This is the primary argument atheists make against God's existence. It runs like this: the existence of unjust and intense suffering in the world — natural disasters, disease, cruelty to the innocent — is incompatible with an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-good God. If God has the power to stop suffering, and wants to stop it, yet does not, then He cannot be both all-powerful and all-good.

The argument resonates because life truly is unfair. Why does the CEO who exploits his workers live in luxury while the single mother working two jobs can barely feed her children? Why does the person who never smoked die of lung cancer at forty-five while the lifelong chain smoker lives to ninety? Why do children suffer? Why do good people experience tragedy while evil people seem to prosper?

Christians sometimes respond by saying, "Everyone is a sinner, therefore everyone deserves death." Theologically, that is correct. But it does not quite address the real complaint: life is not fair, and the distribution of suffering seems to bear no relationship to the distribution of guilt.

Jesus Himself acknowledges this. When the disciples encountered a man born blind and asked whose sin had caused it — this man's or his parents' — Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God might be displayed in him" (John 9:3). When people came to Him with the news of the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices, and of those killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them, Jesus asked plainly, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you" (Luke 13:2–3).

Jesus confirms it: life is unfair. Those who have much are not necessarily more righteous. Those who suffer are not necessarily greater sinners.

But then Jesus adds a word that changes everything: "*Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.*"

Life is unfair now, but justice is coming. Our God is just, and therefore there will be a reckoning — a day when His justice will be fully accomplished.

What I find remarkable about the atheist's argument from injustice is that it actually reveals something profound about the human soul. People are willing to reject God *because* of the injustice in the world. That tells us that deep in the human heart there is a hunger for justice — an instinct that things ought to be made right, that the scales ought to balance, that evil ought not to go unanswered. The argument assumes that justice exists and matters.

But here is where the argument makes its error. It reasons: *Because life is not fair, therefore God must not be just.* What if we start from a different premise? What if we begin with the conviction that God is just, and acknowledge that life is not fair — and then ask what must follow from that?

At least two things follow. First, God must be patient. He is not bringing immediate judgment because He is giving people time to repent. We saw this in the parable of the weeds — God is more concerned with preserving His people than with bringing swift judgment that might sweep them away with the guilty. Second, life must survive the grave. This is one of the great convictions of the wisdom literature of the Old Testament, nowhere more powerfully expressed than in the book of Job. How could Job endure his suffering? Because he knew something that his suffering could not take from him: *“I know that my Redeemer lives... and after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God”* (Job 19:25–27). He could hold on because he was certain that God is just — and therefore that there was something more, yet unseen, still to come.

It is because of this coming day of judgment that Jesus preached as He did. *Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.* The kingdom of heaven is like a net thrown into the sea, gathering fish of every kind, and when it is full, the sorting begins.

There is a day coming when the justice of God will be fully executed, and the unfairness of life will be addressed. To those who doubt or reject God because of the injustices they see around them, hear the testimony of Jesus: a day of justice is coming. Perfect fairness, perfect justice will be done.

Judgment

This leads us to a contradiction worth naming. People say, “I cannot believe in God because of the evil in the world” — and yet the very same people often say, “A loving God would never judge me. He would not send anyone to hell.”

But you cannot have it both ways. You cannot complain about a God who tolerates injustice and then complain about a God who brings judgment. That coming judgment *is* God's justice fulfilled. The God who finally holds evil to account is precisely the God the first complaint is demanding.

Our passage describes that coming judgment this way: *“So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous”* (13:49). Notice something critical here: who is doing the separating? The angels — which means this is a heavenly judgment. God is doing the judging. God alone is weighing the hearts and minds of men and women with perfect knowledge and perfect equity.

This is why we are explicitly forbidden to make this judgment ourselves. Jesus says clearly that those who judge others will themselves be judged. The separation in this parable is not ours to perform. It belongs to God, and only He can do it rightly.

When will it happen? Our passage says: at the end of the age. I cannot give you a date. But I believe it will occur when Christ returns, and the point Jesus is pressing is not the calendar — it is the certainty. Only the most foolish person will live as though God’s justice will never be made manifest.

If God is just, and we live in a world that is plainly unjust, then the only coherent conclusion is that a day of reckoning is coming — a day when those who practiced evil will be confronted with a justice they cannot evade.

Wrath

This carrying out of judgment — the punishment of evil — is what the Bible calls the wrath of God. Let me try to put it plainly.

Are there things in this world that make you angry? Are there things that make your blood boil? Have things been done — to you or to people you love — so terrible that every time you remember them, the rage rises again? People are capable of unspeakable evil. When the Bible speaks of God’s wrath, it is telling us that the Lord will one day confront everything that is evil, everything that is wrong, everything that is unjust, and pour out His judgment upon it without remainder.

I say amen to that.

Amen to His wrath upon those who abuse children. Amen to His wrath upon those who exploit the vulnerable for profit, who traffic in human lives, who murder the innocent, who lie and cheat and manipulate their way through life leaving wreckage behind them. Every act of cruelty, every betrayal, every injustice — God will answer. The wrath of God is not divine temperament or arbitrary fury; it is the holy response of a perfectly just God to everything that defiles and destroys what He made good. And it will bring that evil to an end.

To this I say, amen.

Here is how Jesus describes it in our passage: “*And throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth*” (13:50).

The word Jesus elsewhere uses for this place is *Gehenna* — a term rooted in the Valley of Hinnom, that valley running along the southern edge of Jerusalem. In Israel’s darkest centuries, that valley became the site of some of the nation’s most terrible apostasy, particularly child sacrifice offered to the god Molech (see 2 Kings 16:3; 21:6). The prophets spoke of it as a place called Topheth, and they announced that because of the covenant-breaking and bloodshed practiced there, God’s judgment would fall upon it (Jer. 7:31–33; 19:2–6). The valley became so associated with defilement and death that it lodged itself in the Jewish imagination as an image of final destruction.

So when Jesus uses the word *Gehenna*, He is not borrowing from mythology or popular superstition. He is drawing from Israel’s own history and the warnings of her own prophets to say: God will not ignore evil forever. He will answer it.

In this passage, Jesus describes that place in three ways. He calls it a fiery furnace — unbearable suffering. He speaks of weeping — unbearable grief. What is the grief about? I believe it is grief over sin: seeing one’s own life as God sees it, the full weight of the wrong done finally visible and undeniable. And He speaks of gnashing of teeth — which is the language of rage and bitter defiance. It describes a heart that sees the evil it has done, weeps over it, and yet refuses to repent. The grinding of teeth is not sorrow that leads to life; it is the posture of a will that remains turned in on itself even in the face of perfect judgment.

This describes those who have sinned but refused to repent. And, in a sobering sense, it describes many who remain unsaved today: they may recognize their sin, they may even feel its weight, but they will not turn from it. In a very real sense, they are already in the early stages of that furnace.

Have You Understood?

Our passage ends with Jesus turning to His disciples and asking them a direct question: “*Have you understood all these things?*” *They said to him, “Yes”* (13:51).

Let us ask ourselves the same question. Have you understood? Do you understand that God is just — and that the very injustices of this life are a standing argument for, not against, a coming day of reckoning? Do you understand that a final judgment is coming, that the angels will separate the evil from the righteous, that those who refuse to repent will face the wrath of God in the fiery furnace?

Have you understood?

If so, here is how I would encourage you to respond.

Application

Flee to Christ, for the Wrath You Deserve Has Already Fallen

The justice of God is not only a future reality — it is an accomplished fact. Two thousand years ago, outside Jerusalem, the wrath this parable describes was poured out in full measure. But it was not poured out on the guilty. It was poured out on the innocent.

Jesus Christ took upon Himself the very judgment this parable describes. On the cross, He entered the fiery furnace. He wept the cry of desolation — *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”* He bore what we deserve so that we might receive what He deserves.

God does not overlook sin. He does not ignore evil. Every sin ever committed will be dealt with. The only question is whether it will be paid for by you in the fiery furnace, or whether it has been paid for by Christ on the cross.

The gospel is this: God offers you the righteousness of Christ in exchange for your sin. He offers you life in the place of death. How do you receive it? Repent and believe in His Son, Jesus Christ. When you trust in Christ, God counts Christ’s death as your death and Christ’s righteousness as your righteousness.

This past week, when we heard warnings of snow, people prepared. They made sure they had what they needed before the storm arrived. How much more ought we to prepare when Jesus Himself tells us that judgment is coming? *“Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation”* (2 Corinthians 6:2). If you do not yet know the Lord, come to Him — today.

If You Are in Christ, Rest in His Goodness

For those of you who have repented and believed, this parable is not a source of terror — it is a source of tremendous comfort. When the angels separate the evil from the righteous, you will not be counted among the evil, because Christ’s righteousness has been given to you. When you stand before the Father on that day, the overwhelming sense will not be of narrow escape or mere relief. It will be joy.

You will see Him as He truly is — perfectly just, yes, but also perfectly good. All those years of trusting Him through suffering and injustice, all those moments when you wondered whether He truly cared — on that day you will see that He was good all along. That every moment of your life was held in hands of infinite goodness. That His justice and His love are not in tension with each other but are the same beautiful reality seen from different angles.

Every wrong will be made right. Every tear will be accounted for. Every injustice will be addressed. And you will worship Him not merely because you have been saved from wrath, but because you will finally see clearly the overwhelming goodness and beauty of the One who saved you.

So live today in light of that coming day. Do not take revenge — leave room for God's wrath. Do not grow weary in doing good — your labor is not in vain. And live with urgency for the lost, because we have been entrusted with the message that can save them from the furnace and bring them into the presence of infinite goodness.

A Pastoral Word

I know that some of you are sitting here today thinking about loved ones who have died without Christ. That grief is real, and I do not want to speak past it. I cannot tell you their eternal destiny — that judgment belongs to God alone, and He is both perfectly just and perfectly good. What I can tell you is this: trust Him. The God who loved you enough to send His Son to bear the furnace in your place is not careless with human souls. His justice and His mercy run deeper than our understanding.

For those you love who are still living, pray for them. Share the gospel with them. Live in such a way that they see Christ in you. And trust that the same God who saved you is able to save them.

Closing

The question stands before each of us today: *Have you understood?*

Do you see that God's justice demands judgment — and that in His mercy, He has provided a way of escape through His Son?

For those who do not yet know Christ: the angels are coming. The separation is real. But today is still the day of salvation. Come to Him.

For those who are in Christ: rest. The furnace has been quenched for you. Live with joy, with urgency for the lost, and with confidence in the perfect goodness of your God — the God who is perfectly just and perfectly merciful, and who has proven both beyond all doubt at the cross.

Father, we thank You that You are just — that every wrong will be made right, every evil confronted, every injustice answered. We thank You that You are also merciful — that while we deserved the furnace, You sent Your Son to bear it for us.

For those here today who do not yet know You, we ask that Your Spirit would open their eyes, soften their hearts, and draw them to the cross before it is too late. Give them no peace until they find their peace in Christ.

For Your people, give us confidence in Your goodness even when life is unfair. Help us to trust You with our loved ones. Give us bold hearts to share this message while there is still time.

And bring us all safely to that day when we will stand before You not in terror, but in joy — seeing clearly at last that You have been perfectly just and perfectly good all along.

In Jesus' name, Amen.