

## MATTHEW 11:20-24

### HOW WILL GOD JUDGE THE WICKED?

“Then he began to denounce the cities where most of his mighty works had been done, because they did not repent. ‘ Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, it will be more bearable on the Day of Judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You will be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the Day of Judgment for the land of Sodom than for you.’”<sup>1</sup>

The question submitted read, “How will God judge the wicked?” I had to interpret the intent of my interlocutor. It was possible that the one submitting the question was asking, “What is the physical setting of the Judgment of the wicked?” It is conceivable that the questioner was wondering as to the sentencing parameters. However, I assume the individual was asking the basis for judgement.

The simplest answer is that God judges mankind because of lack of faith in the One whom He has provided to bear sin. This is the clear declaration of the Word. For instance, we read, “Whoever believes in [Jesus, the Son of God] is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God” [JOHN 3:18]. We see that failure to believe equates condemnation now.

Again, John writes, “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him” [JOHN 3:36]. Again, failure to believe the Son means that the one not believing is already an object of God’s wrath.

There is yet another portion of the Word to give us pause. The author of the Letter to Hebrew Christians asked a rhetorical question that is positively frightful in its implication. He asked, “If we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, ‘Vengeance is mine; I will repay’” [HEBREWS 10:26-30a]. The author followed this assessment with the terrifying warning, “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” [HEBREWS 10:31].

I take no pleasure in announcing the condemnation of sinners. The love of Christ constrains me to echo the words spoken by Peter before the Jewish Council, “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” [ACTS 4:12]. No one can assume that she can avoid the warning announced in Scripture. Consider the warning that is spoken to those who trifle with the Word! “Since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable, and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation [HEBREWS 2:2, 3]?”

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However, I believe my questioner was asking clarification for the basis of pronouncing judgement. The Master addressed that matter during His days in the flesh. Listen to this response to questions He received on one occasion. Approached by disciples of John the Baptist for assurance of His Person and ministry, Jesus not only assured them of who He was, but He continued by addressing the perpetual crowd that surrounded Him wherever He went.

“What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings’ houses. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written,

“Behold, I send my messenger before your face,  
who will prepare your way before you.’

“Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force. For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

“But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their playmates,

“We played the flute for you, and you did not dance;  
we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.’

“For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon.’ The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds” [MATTHEW 11:7-19].

He confronted them for their woefully inadequate assessment of John. With the twentieth verse, we read that “He began to denounce the cities where most of His mighty works had been done.” We are informed that He did this “because they did not repent.” Underscore in your mind that their failure to respond to His message revealed their inability to judge appropriately, just as the people in general were incapable of judging John’s appointment. Here is a vital truth to hold in mind: failure to appreciate the messenger who is dedicated to the Master is akin to failure to act on the message of life. These are not two separate failures in the life of people; these are failures revealing a heart that is not attuned to God!

Listen to the condemnation pronounced, paying especial attention to the relationship to judgement of sinners. “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, it will be more bearable on the Day of Judgement for Tyre and Sidon than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You will be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the Day of Judgement for the land of Sodom than for you” [MATTHEW 11:21-24].

As I review the words of the Master, there seem to be several issues related to judgement. There will be a judgement. There are degrees of punishment. The worst sin is indifference. God’s judgement is based on His perfect knowledge. God owes no man salvation.

**THERE WILL BE A JUDGEMENT** — There will be a judgement. We will not come out of that judgement because we are nice people; our own words and our own deeds will condemn us. One of the most awful statements concerning those who must stand before the Great White Throne is this, “The Dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done” [REVELATION 20:12b]. The horror of that scene is intensified by the verse that follows: “the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done” [REVELATION 20:13].

**THERE ARE DEGREES OF PUNISHMENT** — Those who lived in Tyre, Sidon and Sodom will be rightly judged for their own wicked deeds; but their judgement will not be a terrible as that which will be visited upon the cities of privilege. Those who lived in the former cities had never heard of Jesus and His grace; those living in the latter had both heard His message and witnessed His power over all that He had created. Thus, the peoples who were destroyed in the former cities would not suffer as severe punishment as those who were privileged.

It is a truism that **GREAT PRIVILEGE BRINGS GREAT RESPONSIBILITY**. These three cities—Capernaum, Chorazin and Bethsaida—have been referred to as the “Evangelical Triangle.” These three cities were the centre of much of Jesus’ ministry. If the judgement of these cities will be dreadful because of all they had witnessed, how much worse will be the judgement of modern Canadians who have the Word of God available, who are able to hear the declaration of God’s abundant grace and who have received such rich blessings, and yet have turned from pursuing righteousness and from seeking the Lord.

**THE WORST SIN IS INDIFFERENCE** — I was prone to say that the worst sin is unbelief; but it is a peculiar form of unbelief that is in view in Jesus’ words. The cities in question had witnessed his power to transform lives and to free those bound by sin. They had praised Jesus as a great teacher and One who worked miracles. Yet, they were indifferent to His presence. The people of these cities did not attack Jesus; neither did they drive Him from their cities or attempt to crucify Him; they simply disregarded what He said.

Many professed evangelicals act similarly, and assuredly this is true of most of the liturgical Christians. The latter attempt to present their best rituals as sufficient to assuage God’s righteous demands, whilst the former live as though what they had heard and witnessed was of no particular concern. I have already alluded to a warning found in the Letter to Hebrew Christians. Consider the warning again. “If we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace” [HEBREWS 10:26-29]? There is no answer given; it is too awful to contemplate.

Jesus suggested that the root of the sin of these cities was pride through comparing the cities to Satan himself. Verse 23 echoes **ISAIAH 14:13-15**:

“You said in your heart,  
‘I will ascend to heaven;  
above the stars of God

I will set my throne on high;  
I will sit on the mount of assembly  
in the far reaches of the north;  
I will ascend above the heights of the clouds;  
I will make myself like the Most High.’  
But you are brought down to Sheol,  
to the far reaches of the pit.”

So it is that the root of our own indifference is our pride and self-contentment.

**GOD’S JUDGEMENT IS BASED ON HIS PERFECT KNOWLEDGE** — Jesus indicated that His judgement will not only be on what has been done, but on what would have been done under other circumstances. God will take into account, not only the advantages we enjoy when we are judged for our moral and ethical standing, and for our response to Jesus the Master, but we will be judged for the use of opportunities compared to what Iranians or Cambodians would have done had they been provided the same opportunity.

**GOD OWES NO MAN SALVATION** — Here is a final difficult lesson to draw from Jesus’ words. Although Jesus says that the people of Tyre, Sidon and Sodom would have repented had they witnessed what He was doing, they nevertheless perished because they did not respond to the light God granted them. God does not owe us mercy. If mercy were owed to anyone, it would not be mercy. God owes us justice—and we will get justice if we fail to respond to His grace. However, He now extends grace and mercy to all who are willing to receive it. However, if we reject that grace, we have only “a fearful expectation of judgement, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries” [**HEBREWS 10:27**].

However, mercy is now extended to all who will receive the gift of life in Christ the Lord. The Word of God promises, “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. For the Scripture says, ‘Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.’ For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For ‘everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved’” [**ROMANS 10:9-13**].