

– II –

JESUS' TEACHING ON THE JUDGMENT

In chapter one I boldly claimed that the interpretation we take from Paul's writing chafes against Jesus' teachings on the Judgment. I gave a couple examples and then broached a whirlwind of related questions and ponderings.

As mentioned earlier, Jesus and His apostles could not have spread a message about how His blood was going to redeem us from our sins — no one, not even His disciples, knew He was going to die. He alluded to this a few times, (which the gospel writers point out because it would have significance for their audience), but this could hardly have been part of His or His disciples' general message to the Jewish crowds if not even John, Peter, and the rest had figured it out. (Just a reminder — there is a deeper discussion on what Jesus did not preach in the appendix beginning on page 177.) We will investigate Jesus' general message in chapters five and six, but here we focus just on His words concerning the Judgment and why the standard reconciliation between His words and church doctrine simply does not work.

Here I'm not developing an extensive description of the Judgment but merely demonstrating a need for a conversation. Don't draw too many conclusions from the observations in this chapter, observations that might leave you even more bewildered and quizzical than the last chapter. The good news is that in chapter three I start answering some questions instead of just piling more on.

Nor am I looking for a total refutation based on a single passage (though I do believe some of these examples provide that). My point is not *this parable absolutely unmans the modern gospel*. Rather, I'm asking people to look at the collection of teachings the gospel writers included and realize they point unequivocally at conclusions very much in conflict with the evangelical dogma.

The Synoptic Gospels

Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called the Synoptic Gospels because they give a synopsis of Christ's ministry. Since they largely reinforce each other, I will discuss examples in Matthew. As we look at these passages, ask yourself what message Matthew is conveying. How would a 1st-century Jew understand Jesus' teachings (or Matthew's compilation of them)?

Note, there are passages whose relevance to the final Judgment is debateable or that appear to blend this judgment with others. Here I've captured only those passages where it can be certain that heaven-or-hell Judgment is in view.

Matthew 5:22–30

Here, Christ gives several warnings about hell, portraying the dangers of sin rather graphically, saying things like **If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away! It is better to lose one of your members than to have your whole body thrown into hell.**

Now, I don't believe Jesus is advocating actual self-mutilation, but the gist of His message is something along the lines of *Avoid sin at any cost, for sinning puts you in danger of hell, which is worse than anything you might imagine.*

These admonitions strike me as unnatural when put next to the modern gospel. Christ speaks to people who have already sinned. According to the modern gospel, they are *already* "guilty," regardless of whether they sin in the future or not. In *Mark 9:43–49* Jesus directs these warnings to His disciples. Why would His disciples (who began believing in Him back when He turned water into wine: *John 2:11*) be in danger of hell? On top of that, why would they be in danger due to possible future sins?

Christ's words imply that all are in danger of hell due to their sin without necessarily being *already condemned*; that is twice removed from the modern gospel. Evangelicals claim believers are in no danger of hell while non-believers are in total danger. They further claim we all naturally deserve eternal wrath.

Matthew 7:21–23

Jesus crowns the Sermon on the Mount by saying

Not everyone who says to me "Lord, Lord" will enter into the kingdom of heaven — only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day, many will say to me "Lord, Lord, didn't we prophesy in your name, and in your name cast out demons and do many powerful deeds?" Then I will declare to them "I never knew you. Go away from me, you lawbreakers."

Jesus does not dispute that they have true faith, faith enough to throw out demons. Yet Christ indicates these will be rejected at the Judgment.

Some key on the **I never knew you** snippet, as though that is the cause for rejection. In reality Christ has already given the reason: **only the one who does the will of my Father**. This passage leads into 7:24-26, contrasting those who adhere to Jesus' commands (**Everyone who hears these words of mine and does them**) with those who ignore the commands comprising His sermon. Comparing the parallel in *Luke 6:47-49* (where Jesus contrasts those who put His commands **into practice** and those who do not) shows that *Matthew 7:21-23* matches up with **Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord' and don't do what I tell you?** (*Luke 6:46*) So we must understand the condemnation in *Matthew 7:21-23* is due to disobedience, not a lack of relationship.

When Jesus says **I never knew you**, He is *disavowing* them, not indicating a lack of familiarity. Like in *Luke 13:27* (**I don't know where you come from**), He is not saying He doesn't know the people — He taught and ate with them. Rather, He is disassociating Himself from those who do not do God's will, just as Peter did when he denied association with Christ (e.g., *Luke 22:55-60*).

This denial should not surprise us. As Paul writes in *2nd Timothy 2:12* *to believers if we deny Him, He will also deny us*. His words in *1st Thessalonians 4:3-8* show this rejection cannot be seen as simple unbelief.

Matthew 12:36-37

Jesus tells the Pharisees **I tell you that on the day of Judgment, people will give an account for every worthless word they speak. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.**

When I asked my evangelical friends about the first of these two verses, I was told, "There will be an accounting, but we will not be condemned by it." That struck me as odd. It does not make much sense given the second verse.

Furthermore, how does the idea of our being **justified** by our own words fit the gospel we are taught?

Matthew 13:24-50

Jesus describes the Judgment in the *Wheat and the Weeds*, a parable recorded in *Matthew 13:24-30* and explained in verses 37-42. Someone plants wheat in a field and is later told by his slaves that weeds sprouted at the same time as the wheat. The slaves ask him if they should go pull up the weeds now. The owner replies **No, since in gathering the weeds you may uproot the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest.**

At the harvest, The angels pull out the weeds (described as **everything that causes sin as well as all lawbreakers**) and throw them into a **fiery furnace**, leaving the **righteous** to shine in the **kingdom of their Father**.

The most obvious question is, "What would cause the slaves to uproot wheat when pulling out the weeds?" The answer becomes more clear if we understand that Jesus does not mean just any old weed here. He refers to *darnel*, which closely resembles wheat until harvest time. The *fruit* of the wheat plant is very different from the *fruit* of the darnel plant (to put things in the context of *Matthew 12:33*), but otherwise the plants are nearly indistinguishable.

There is no mention of atonement or forgiveness of sins. All plants are judged the same way. The reapers are not told to overlook the bad fruits of certain special plants. While parables are not exhaustive treatments of a subject, we expect some mention of Christ's sacrifice if forgiveness of sins (rather than judgment of fruits) is the prevailing factor at the Judgment.

A few verses after explaining this parable, Jesus gives a very similar one in *Matthew 13:47-50* where fishermen cast nets. The conclusion of that parable reads **It will be this way at the end of the age. Angels will come and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.**

Some claim the first parable says nothing about how the Judgment works, but teaches that only good seed can bring forth good fruit. This makes little sense of the whole dialogue between the reapers and the owner. In any event, the second parable contains nothing that would point to this conclusion.

Evangelicals often explain parables like these by saying our works are judged *as proof of our faith*. Another solution Christians propose is "God judges us by our works, but only judges believers by their *good works*," which is the Lutheran position (as described in *Christian Dogmatics*).

These explanations fail to explain why Jesus makes no mention of atonement or forgiveness. A straight-forward reading has Jesus tying the Judgment to repentance, rather than to belief, forgiveness, or redirection of God's wrath. In particular, it is hard to reconcile this parable with the claim that those who never hear of Jesus are simply "out of luck" because God's hands are tied.

Worse, these defenses fail to respect Jesus' point. Christ's words are a call to repent from **everything that causes sin**, which He alludes to before these parables (*Matthew 13:15*). Indeed, Matthew describes the same message of repentance with identical imagery when referring to John's ministry in 3:8.

This must be an exhortation to repentance rather than something more arcane, for the disciples indicate they understood these parables (*Matthew 13:51*), yet Jesus had not even begun to speak of His later suffering (which occurs in

Matthew 16:21). Matthew gives no commentary here or anywhere else that allows a reader to violently reinterpret this parable as anything other than a call to turn from evil deeds for the sake of the hearer's eternal destiny. If one (unforgiven) sin were just as damning as a trillion, Jesus would be giving His listeners false hope. If repentance toward God is not sufficient to pass the Judgment, then Jesus is criminally misleading His listeners. Jesus does not serve up this call to repentance with a side-order of the modern gospel or anything else that could be construed as "belief in Christ." At this point the general Jewish population had no idea that Jesus was the Christ.

These teachings of Christ really represent two separate problems for the modern gospel. First, Jesus is presenting a Judgment using language that people today would decry as "works-righteousness." Secondly, Jesus' description implicitly disproves the idea that none are "righteous in God's eyes." When Jesus speaks of **the evil** in this parable, He clearly does not mean *everyone that has not been cleansed by My blood*. There is no inkling of that either in the parables or in the commentary by Matthew. No objective person would read this and think the **evil** here refers to every person's default state. If Jesus wants His disciples to change their understanding of *the evil* versus *the righteous*, He would not describe the **evil** people in *Matthew 13:41* as **everyone who causes sin and the ones who practice lawlessness just as He did in Matthew 5:19**.

Matthew 16:26–27

Jesus says **For the Son of Man will come with His angels in the glory of His Father, and then He will reward each according to what he has done.**

To explain this verse and similar ones, some strands of Christianity developed "rewards theology." They claim good deeds earn prestige in heaven's society without determining who gains admittance. In other words, they say Christ is talking about icing on the cake here... without discussing the cake.

But Christ is clearly not referring to such "bonus points" here because this passage comes immediately after the warning **For what does it benefit a person if he gains the whole world but forfeits his life? Or what can a person give in exchange for his life?** (The Greek for "life" and "soul" are the same.)

Another reason Jesus cannot be referring to mere rewards here is that the verse He quotes from the Old Testament (*Psalms 62:12*) is the same one Paul uses in *Romans 2:6* when describing who goes to heaven and who goes to hell — exactly what "rewards theology" claims Jesus is not discussing here.

As in *Luke 10:25–28*, Jesus is affirming the Jews' understanding of God's Judgment, not reinterpreting it.

Matthew 25:31–46

Could Jesus be more clear about the Judgment than in His parable of the sheep and goats? . . . **inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink.** . . . certainly seems clear to me. He goes so far as to call one group **righteous** before contrasting them with the **unrighteous** who ignored those in need and will depart into **eternal punishment**.

Christ calls certain people **righteous** based on charity and stewardship. He makes no reference to Christians being judged any differently than unbelievers. How would a miserly believer fare according to Christ's depiction?

Artificial Righteousness

Some evangelicals preach that nothing we do makes us righteous, even after we believe. They claim that our righteousness, at least for purposes of the Judgment, is an artificial righteousness God gives us. Just as God places our sins on Jesus, Jesus' merit is placed on us. I'll occasionally refer to this notion of "imputed" righteousness throughout the book, but for right now I just wanted to point out we find absolutely nothing like that portrayed in Jesus' teachings.

What about John?

It must be admitted that many passages and verses in John appear at first blush to support the modern gospel, but there are also places, like *John 5:29*, that agree with the repeated teachings of the three synoptic gospels.

The passage of Jewish ideas to Greek manuscripts to English translations has been roughest on John's gospel, which presents many abstract discourses Jesus told Jews that John had to convey to Greeks. The next two chapters are dedicated to understanding John's gospel, but for now I'd like to use a single, extremely famous, example to show how easy it is to misconstrue John's words.

John 3:16 represents to many a clear articulation of the gospel. It has all the ingredients: God's love, the giving of the Son, belief, and eternal life. What happens when we read the passage in context?

The **eternal life** in *John 3:15–16* is linked to the **kingdom of God** described in the earlier conversation John is commenting on (verse 6). Jesus says **unless a man is born of water and spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God**. Reading the longer passage confirms that the **kingdom of God** is a reference to the Spirit received through baptism, not post-Judgment life in heaven. I realize

it's odd to say that **eternal life** refers to life in the present rather than life after the Judgment — we will discuss this at length in the next two chapters.

John 3:16–21 does not say that unbelievers are condemned due to a general unrighteousness plaguing all humanity. What is the reason given?

Now this is the basis for judging, that the light has come into the world and the people loved the darkness rather than the light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the light and does not come to the light, so that their deeds will not be exposed.

The condemnation described is *because the person loves the darkness rather than the light*, which is very different from the reason given by the Church. Imagine a 2nd-century Jew who has never heard of Jesus and is trying to do God's will, living by the commandments given in the Torah. The evangelical viewpoint is that such ignorance is no excuse... but does that Jew fail to believe *because she hates the light*? No. She fails to believe for the same reason that ancient people didn't believe in Elvis sightings.

Now, consider a 21st-century Buddhist who lives out Christ's laws but does not self-label as a Christian because every Christian he ever knew was a judgmental jerk. Did that Buddhist *reject* Christ because he *hates the light*?

No, the passage is not a universal discussion of how the Judgment works; by its own wording it could apply only to those with full knowledge of Jesus. Even if this passage refers to the final Judgment, it would not do evangelicals any favors, for the passage clearly links the condemnation to someone's *disposition*.

In reality, John is referring to the judgment of the Jewish leaders who rejected Christ (3:19). This condemnation *has already taken place* (3:18), for the Romans came in 70 A.D. and destroyed the temple, an indescribably severe loss for the Jews whose entire culture revolved around it.¹ As we will see in chapters five and six, the Jews reject Christ because He exposed their twisting of God's Law to their own ends, hence the **For everyone who does evil hates the light and does not come to the light, so that their deeds will not be exposed.**

So, John is not discussing the Final Judgment; even if he were, the reason for condemnation here is not the reason given by the modern gospel. John indicates a Judgment of disposition, which is very different from the Judgment claimed by evangelicals. This whole passage makes more sense when you understand John's purpose in writing his gospel, which we will discuss in chapter nine.

¹Indeed, *John 11:48* is an ironic prophecy. It's also a clever wordplay because "take away our temple" could just as easily refer to Christ's crucifixion — the Greek for "take away" is the same word John uses for "crucify," and Jesus' body is God's temple.

Why the Standard Answer Fails

Evangelicals have faced a philosophical problem for centuries. *If we are saved by faith, what stops someone from being a terrible, greedy, selfish person, all the while being assured a place in heaven based on faith in Christ?*

A commonly given response is “true faith produces works.” While this addresses the *philosophical* issue described above, it does not solve the *biblical* problems described in chapters one and two.

The philosophical problem “why do believers get to safely do anything they want?” is *not* the same as “if going to heaven is based only on forgiveness through faith, why is that message not found in Jesus’ teachings?” I think Christians confuse the two, thinking an answer to the first is a solution to the second.

I’ve hinted already why “we are judged by our works as evidence of our faith” is not a satisfactory answer. After all, if Jesus thought the Judgment really boiled down to forgiveness through faith, He could have simply said so. If the apostles saw Christ’s purpose as delivering people from hell, they would have gone to the Gentiles sooner. They didn’t.

Here I’d like to show directly why “true faith causes good deeds” does not resolve the difficulties posed by the teachings of Christ.

In *John 5:29* Jesus describes that He will raise all the dead, . . . **the ones who have done what is good to the resurrection resulting in life, and the ones who have done what is evil to the resurrection resulting in condemnation.** (Incidentally, I asked a trained evangelist about this passage and was told “John doesn’t say there *are* any people in the group Jesus says had ‘done good.’”)

Based on this verse and many similar passages, the *only* way to maintain the evangelical view is to claim *only believers can do good* and *all believers do good*. But evangelicals *do* say only believers in Christ can do deeds that please God. So it does not seem like there’s a problem.

But there is a problem — *Someone can be pleasing to God without having faith in Christ or knowing the gospel.* This has been shown throughout scripture by several people in different categories. Similarly, the Bible gives several examples of people having true faith who are still condemned by their deeds, the deeds Jesus claims are the basis for Judging.

We’ll look at each side of the *We are judged by our deeds as evidence of our faith because faith in Christ (and only faith in Christ) leads one to do works pleasing to God* defense here. If *either* half failed, it would show the modern gospel is not biblically supportable. It really should not surprise us that neither holds, for “true faith produces works” is far too pat an answer to address why Jesus’ portrayal of the Judgment is so different from what most are told.

Claim 1: Does True Faith Always Produce the Righteous Acts Jesus Says Will Be the Basis for Judgment?

This may sound like a stupid question. “If your faith does not produce works, it was not real faith to begin with” sounds like a reasonable claim.

The problem is that it considers the question within a vacuum, naïvely suggesting that our faith or lack thereof is the only thing determining our actions. In the real world, our various beliefs, desires, psychological insecurities, misconceptions, and emotions each play a role. When I chose not to disclose that my Christian faith was one reason I stood waiting for the *WALK* sign (way back at the beginning of chapter 1), it did not retroactively scuttle a lifetime of belief. You could say my faith was weak at that moment or that I was a coward, but you could hardly claim the action was because I didn’t have *any* true faith. Yet, Jesus and the authors of the New Testament willingly suffered persecution orders of magnitude greater than whatever I was dodging with Danielle. They would damn me for such craven behavior, and rightfully so! (*Luke 9:26; Romans 8:17; Hebrews 10:25–36; and 1st Peter 4:16–17*)

There are plenty of broader examples in scripture. We will note these while taking a closer look at the reasoning used to prop up the “true faith produces works” defense. When investigating this topic, it is critical to observe that only “true faith” can grant someone the present gifts of Christ’s work. Hence, we will be looking particularly at places where the Bible refers to someone who has received these blessings. For example, if the Bible says someone has been **sanctified by Christ’s blood**, that person *had* to have “true faith.”

Defense 1: Faith Produces Works out of Gratitude

One common rationale is that we are so grateful for Christ’s work that we naturally desire to do God’s will. That sounds good in theory, but claiming this is the motivation for good works paints God as a pretty stupid Supreme Being. The Old Testament shows humans do not act this way. What do we see almost immediately after God rescues the Israelites from Egypt? They don’t even get to Sinai before beginning to complain. *Exodus 15:1–19* is their song of triumph; by *16:3*, they’d rather be back as slaves in Egypt!

Similarly, Aaron was singled out as God’s mouthpiece and head of the entire priest caste, but he still became envious of Moses in *Numbers 12:1–3*. Saul was elevated by God from nothing to be king of Israel, and yet it did not lead him to do all that the Lord commanded. He certainly performed many works for God, yet God found him wanting. Solomon was graced with more than perhaps any Old Testament king, yet the vast grace shown to him did not keep him faithful.

Defense 2: A New Heart Provokes Good Deeds

The more common reason given is that believers will naturally do good works by virtue of the new heart worked by their conversion. The claim then is that anyone who is not doing good works was never really converted in the first place. As logical as this sounds, it is also contradicted by the Bible. The error here is that the “new heart” spoken of is misunderstood.

It is not that we get brainwashed into doing God’s will when earlier we did not desire it. The Old Testament is festooned with people with a heart for God before such a “new heart” was available. Rather, those who already desire to do God’s will are given a better understanding of what that will is and a stronger resolve toward doing it. This gets back to *John 3:19–21* and *7:17*; there were *already* people who desired to do God’s will. The new heart enhances their ability to do it. Paul speaks of the same thing in *Romans 7:15–25* (before receiving the new heart) and *Romans 8:1–8* (describing the effect of the Spirit after being pulled from the spiritual shackles that our Bibles translate as **condemnation**).

In the New Testament we see examples of people who were freed from sin by genuine belief, yet even the new heart did not provoke the level of righteousness demanded by Christ. He tells John (*Revelation 2:3–5*) to write the church in Ephesus, saying that He is **aware that you have persisted steadfastly, endured much for the sake of my name, and have not grown weary**. In the next breath He says **You have departed from your first love! Therefore, remember from what high state you have fallen and repent! Do the deeds you did at first**. That hardly sounds like the people lacked authentic faith.

The writer of Hebrews describes the same problem in *Hebrews 10:24–31*, speaking to people he says have been **made holy** by Christ’s blood. A rather direct rebuttal is given in *2nd Peter 1:8–9*, citing the danger of **becoming ineffective and unproductive in your pursuit of knowing our Lord Jesus Christ more intimately** for someone who has **forgotten about the cleansing of his past sins**. Later in the same epistle we hear about those who have **escaped the filthy things of this world** but are then re-ensnared to them. For these, Peter claims **their last state has become worse for them than their first**. Nor can all this be swept under the carpet of “falling away,” as though Peter is talking about loss of faith. Rather, Peter specifically refers to turning **back from the holy commandments that had been delivered to them** (*2nd Peter 2:20–21*).

Add to the above the many exhortations by Paul for people who were already sanctified to live in the way they should. Indeed, that is the entire point of *Romans 6:12–23*, a passage that would be unneeded if a new heart were, by itself, enough to ensure good deeds. Paul spends several chapters blasting the

church of Corinth for living sinful lives even though they had been **washed, sanctified, and justified** already (*1st Corinthians 6:11*).

Jesus describes the situation well in the Parable of the Soils in *Matthew 13:3–23*; *Mark 4:3–20*; and *Luke 8:5–15*. Some people never believe. Some people believe, even **receive the word with joy**, but persecution stops them from holding fast to the Christian hope. Others believe, but the competing lies of the world stop them from being productive. Only some who believe bear fruit.

It is important to note that this second group actually did truly believe. Jesus says so in Luke’s account. Their belief just could not stand up against persecution, much like Peter’s didn’t stand up in *Matthew 26:69–75*. This is the concern the writer of Hebrews is responding to in *Hebrews 10:25*, for some believers had stopped meeting in fellowship for fear of persecution (see *10:32–39*). He is most definitely writing to true believers, believers who have had their **hearts sprinkled clean** according to *10:23*.

Similarly, the focus is not on the death of the third group, but rather that they did not produce anything. The lies of the world (Jesus mentions fear, materialism, and covetousness) make someone unproductive. These people do not lose faith but rather have their faith overrun by provisions of the flesh.

Claim 2: Must one believe in Jesus to do good?

This side is slightly easier to consider because we no longer have to worry about whether a given person’s faith counted as “true faith” or not. Instead, we only have to look at people who were genuinely described as pleasing God.

Nineveh — Enemies of God

Jonah’s work in Nineveh has to look bizarre to anyone who holds the modern gospel. Jonah’s short book poses a significant problem for evangelical claims because a wicked people with no belief in a coming Messiah avoids God’s wrath purely through repentance, without any sacrifice or faith in a far-future Christ.

Rahab — Oblivious to the Gospel

Rahab (*Joshua 2:1–3*) is commended for her faith in *Hebrews 11:31* and *James 2:25*. But what did she have faith in? She certainly didn’t have faith in Christ, nor in any kind of gospel message. The only thing Rahab knew was that the God of Israel (Whom she knew nothing about!) was real.

That’s it. That was all she knew — *the God these other people worship exists and has power*. James’ general conception of faith (*James 2:19*) **God is one** is not much more sophisticated than Rahab’s. Jesus Himself lumps this with the

two great laws when quoting from the Old Testament in *Mark 12:29*: **The most important is: "Listen, Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. . ."**

If Rahab (a heathen prostitute who had no understanding of the gospel) can be commended for her actions based on faith, we *must* allow that someone can act on a faith *in God* without any knowledge *of Christ*, or *the gospel*. Rahab's faith was not in forgiveness of sins. Rahab's faith was shown in her actions and her belief (*Joshua 2:11*) that **The Lord your God is God in heaven above and on earth below!** One cannot say she put faith in God to protect her, for it was the spies she trusted with regard to her personal security — and her immediate deliverance from death was conditional on her following their instructions exactly. Her faith was in God's power, not in any personal divine intervention on her behalf. Even if one reads into the text that Rahab was saved because she depended on God's mercy, that is hardly a defense of the evangelical position. First, Rahab's action certainly had nothing to do with her *eternal* security. Secondly, one can "rely on God's mercy" without any belief in (or even knowledge of) Christ.

If Rahab can be commended for responding to her primitive understanding of the Living God, why can't others who lack the gospel also do God's will? Rahab's example shows that you can do good *based on whatever understanding of God you have, even if you know no gospel*.

Noah — Before there was a Gospel

God **found favor with Noah** (*Genesis 6:8*) *before* he built the ark. There was no gospel to believe in, no Christ to look forward to. God's promise to Abraham was the foundation of the gospel,² and he would not come for another 20 generations. Noah found favor by doing God's will as best he knew it.

²Some claim there were predictions of Christ earlier than Abraham, suggesting that people from the beginning were told of a coming savior. The Jewish writers of the New Testament, who knew the Old Testament backwards and forwards, don't describe any. Nor do we see remarks stressing the importance of believing in a coming savior *anywhere* in the Old Testament or the concept that the Messiah was to save *individuals* from *hell*. We have no indication *Genesis 3:14–16* was treated by those before Abraham as anything but a "just-so" story explaining why snakes have no legs. Among the dozens of prophecies the gospel writers show Christ fulfilling, not one of them hails from before Abraham's time. When Paul explains why the Gentiles could receive the Holy Spirit, it is because they have become **descendants of Abraham** (*Galatians 3:29*), and the reason Christ gives in *Luke 19:8* for salvation coming to Zaccheus' house is **because he, too, is a son of Abraham**. The writer of Hebrews describes how it is the **descendants of Abraham** God gives help to in *Hebrews 2:16*.

Cornelius — Before Hearing the Gospel

Cornelius' deeds found favor with God (*Acts 10:4*) *before* Peter preaches the gospel to him. In fact, unlike the Jews of the Old Testament, Cornelius was not even looking forward to salvation in the abstract sense. The Jews, including the apostles, solidly believed that the Christ was sent just for them. For example, Paul writes to Gentiles in *Ephesians 2:12*, **you were at that time without Christ, alienated from the citizenship of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.** Cornelius refused to convert to Judaism, so it can hardly be thought he had faith or hope in *their* Messiah. Based on the description from Acts, there is little reason to believe Cornelius thought of Jesus as anything more than a powerful man of God rumored to be healing people around Judea.

What makes Cornelius, who lived after Christ's coming, wasn't a Jew, and had not heard the gospel, any different from people today who try to do God's will as best they know it?

These examples show what most accept without evidence: people can do godly deeds based on whatever knowledge of God they have. Helping the poor, defending the oppressed, depending on God to provide, and many other virtuous enterprises adorn the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. Can anyone really claim it is impossible to do these without faith in Christ? (I would concur it is impossible to do these things for the right reasons without faith in *God*.)

I'm not saying that people can just ignore Christ or that we should not proclaim the risen King. I'm just showing that the "true faith produces works" idea does not resolve the conflicts I've described so far because non-Christians can do God-pleasing works through whatever faith in God they have. There is a big difference between saying you cannot do good without faith *in God* and saying you cannot do good without faith *in Christ*. Yet evangelicals only allow the latter, for Peter claims **there is salvation in no one else** (*Acts 4:12*).

Some say "If you don't believe in Christ, you can't have faith in the living God, because the living God sent Christ. If you believe in a god that didn't send Christ, you believe in a god that does not exist." This reasoning appeals to dubious logic and is beaten senseless by several biblical examples.

Did Rahab respond to faith in a false god? Was Noah faithful to a false god? Was Cornelius commended for idolatry? None of these knew the gospel of Christ. Paul claims God's plan for all people to have a part in Abraham's blessing had been kept a secret (*Romans 16:25-26*; *Ephesians 3:5-6*; and *Colossians*

1:26). Isn't the logical conclusion that these people were affirmed by direct belief in God's existence and power in the present rather than faith in a gospel of future grace? If the above examples did not convince you that ignorance does not make people idolaters, I refer you to Paul's respect for the Athenians in *Acts 17:23*.

The logic claiming "anyone who does not believe in Jesus cannot have true faith in God" is dangerously close to saying "If you don't believe everything we believe, you're an idolater." Using this reasoning, any Christian sect can claim all others are cults. For example, Lutherans (who believe the bread and wine of communion are more than a mere symbol of Christ's body and blood) could say, "If you believe the bread and wine are a mere symbol of Christ's body and blood, you are an idolater. Your Jesus never existed because the real Jesus (the one I believe in) said that the bread **is** His body and the wine **is** His blood."

The above paragraphs show the sort of energy wasted in fighting between factions. We can disagree without cultifying each other. What does Paul say in *1st Corinthians 12:3*? **No one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit.** The same knife that divvies up the church cuts the hearts within it. How can we show Jesus' love to the world if we cannot show it to our brothers and sisters in Christ? The emotional mortar spent firmly maintaining orthodoxy's walls would be better spent mending creation and the lives within it.

The same applies to individuals in a given church. We should be united by our love of God and obedience to Christ, not our catechisms. A "dogma first" mentality may allow a church to win the battle of confessional purity, but risks losing the war — ministering to those for whom Christ died. When Christ healed people, He didn't ask them to affirm 23 articles of faith. When Paul refers to defending **sound doctrine**, he writes of *applied* doctrine regarding behavior **conforming to godliness**, not abstract theories about how God works. Our spiritual roadsides are bedecked by the battered souls of orphans effectively disowned by their local churches, to say nothing of those feeling lost within their congregations. Remember, dogma was likely the reason the priest in the Good Samaritan parable stayed far from the victim, who might have been dead — even accidentally touching a corpse would render him unclean for temple service.

I think many believers grapple with the claim that only those lucky enough to hear about Christ have a chance at heaven. I doubt most evangelicals ever come to complete peace on the matter. Instead, they stop wrestling with these issues because no one presents a satisfactory solution. Our desire for personal security, our preferred conceptions of God, and pressure from the church create a draining tug-of-war in the heart of the believer, and I think many Christians eventually block it off, deciding it isn't worth the emotional turmoil.

Summary and Final Notes

Jesus' version of the Judgment stands in complete conflict with what people are told constitutes "Bible-based Christianity," which depends upon an *interpretation* of Paul.

Jesus' Teaching	Modern Interpretation of Paul
All deeds relevant	Only unforgiven sin relevant
Judgment like an evaluation	Judgment like a court of law
No special treatment for believers	Absolute special treatment
Those who do good are called to life.	Those who believe are justified.
Workers of lawlessness are "in danger of" hell, regardless of their faith.	Non-believers have no hope of justification regardless of their actions.
People are called righteous without mention of faith.	No one is righteous.
Focus on faithfulness to Jesus' commandments	Focus on faith in Christ's sacrifice
Righteousness by adjudication	Righteousness by imputation

You should not jump to conclusions about the Judgment based on the chart above. I'm not laying a foundation for Unitarianism, saying that it doesn't matter what you believe or that all religions are routes to God or anything like that. I am simply investigating the Judgment here.

One can hardly defend the broad chasm between Jesus' teachings and modern dogma on the basis that Jesus was not "showing the full picture" to the Jews. These parables represent not only Jesus' teachings to the Jews but the teachings Matthew, Mark, and Luke chose to capture for their audiences. As demonstrated in this chapter, if the gospel message is *Jesus died for our sins to allow God to excuse believers at the Judgment*, then Matthew does a rather rotten job of transmitting that message. While Jesus does give the disciples extra clarity on some parables, we must also keep in mind Jesus' defense before the Jews in *John 18:20–21*, where claims to have preached His message openly and **said nothing in secret**.

In any event, Jesus' descriptions and admonitions are hardly a "partial picture" of a Judgment resembling that painted by evangelicals. One does not prepare lasagna by beginning with a Graham-cracker pie crust and filling in appropriately.

The last two rows of the chart deserve special consideration. People often speak of "faith in Christ" when they really mean "faith that Christ's blood is

sufficient to pay my debt” or “faith that Christ can save me from hell.” These understandings of faith are even further removed from Jesus’ description of the Judgment. Whatever faith is shown by the works being judged is certainly not a faith in the sufficiency of Christ’s sacrifice. It is easy to imagine people having full confidence that Christ’s sacrifice has paid their debt, yet living with no respect for Jesus’ commands of love toward all and succor to the oppressed. Isn’t the conservative church regularly indicted on this very charge?

Similarly, the righteousness of which Christ speaks repeatedly cannot by any reading be seen as righteousness gained by God taking Jesus’ righteousness and putting it on believers. There is none of that to be seen in the wheat, fish, sheep, or any other metaphors Christ uses. Nor is it to be found in others’ descriptions of the Judgment. For example, *1st Peter 1:13–16* exhorts people to righteousness and then *1st Peter 1:17* reads **If you address as Father the one who impartially judges according to each one’s work, live out the time of your temporary residence here in reverence.** *James 2:12–13* is similarly at odds with evangelical thought on this score.

These differences cannot easily be reconciled by saying “It is the will of God to believe in Christ” or “If you believe, you will do the will of God.” There are plenty of people (those who came before Jesus, those who never heard of Jesus, those who heard a warped version of the gospel, etc.) who can do God’s will and never come to faith in Christ. Furthermore, Christ is just as fervent in warning His disciples about the dangers of sin as He is those who would reject Him.

Such pat answers subordinate Christ to Paul, showing more interest in making Christ comply with our philosophy than allowing Him to simply mean what He says. It is not that His rendering of the Judgment is *incomplete* — His picture is *incompatible* with anything resembling the modern one. To say evangelicals get the Judgment right is to call Jesus a liar. The dogma of the church will pass away, but *The Sheep and the Goats* will remain for any who have ears.

The issue is not that Paul and Christ disagree with each other, but rather that they *appear* to conflict due to the interpretations we are taught and assumptions we bring into our Bible reading. When Paul clearly speaks of the Judgment, his version is in line with Jesus’. We do not need to force one to agree with the other through rhetorical acrobatics, but we will need to put aside our expectations when trying to understand Christ’s purpose. And that starts in the next chapter.