

**Matthew 25:31-46**

- Mat 25:31 "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory.
- Mat 25:32 All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.
- Mat 25:33 He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.
- Mat 25:34 "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.
- Mat 25:35 For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in,
- Mat 25:36 I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'
- Mat 25:37 "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink?
- Mat 25:38 When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you?
- Mat 25:39 When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'
- Mat 25:40 "The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'
- Mat 25:41 "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.
- Mat 25:42 For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink,
- Mat 25:43 I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.'
- Mat 25:44 "They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?'
- Mat 25:45 "He will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'
- Mat 25:46 "Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."

**INTRODUCTION**

***The sheep and the goats (25:31-46).***

We come now to the last of this series of five parables that Jesus uses to indicate different aspects of His return. Through the preceding part of this passage we get the context setting for this last section of teaching by Jesus.

His teaching is in response to the question;

Mat 24:3 *As He was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately, saying, "Tell us, when will these things happen, and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?"*

Jesus gives this discourse teaching what could best be called Eschatological principles of the Kingdom of God to His disciples. The final part of this discourse is a teaching about judgement on the basis of deeds. Now for Christians who have grown up on a diet of “*saved by grace*” correctly understood in this context as “*undeserved favour*” this teaching seems to be saying that you enter the Kingdom of God by works.

**Here are five possibilities;**

1. The great majority of scholars have understood "the least of these brothers of mine" (vv. 40, 45) to refer to all who are hungry, distressed, needy. The basis of acceptance into the kingdom is thus established by deeds of mercy and compassion. This narrowing down to Christians Jesus' teaching that the eschatological judgment would decide the fate of all men according to their response to all human need is unconvincing because it does not take into account many Scriptures that say otherwise.

The weakness of this general position is the identification of the least of Jesus' brothers with the poor and needy without distinction. There is no parallel for this, but there are one or two excellent alternative interpretations with strong New Testament parallels.

2. If the first interpretation extends "one of the least of these brothers of mine" too far, the second does not go far enough. Several scholars argue that Jesus' "*least brothers*" are apostles and other Christian missionaries, the treatment of whom determines the fate of all men. Those who receive them receive Christ; those who reject them reject Christ (cf. Matt 10:40-42).

40 *"He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives the one who sent me.*

41 *Anyone who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and anyone who receives a righteous man because he is a righteous man will receive a righteous man's reward.*

42 *And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward."*

This interpretation is much closer to the text than the first one. The only hesitation concerns the restriction to apostles and missionaries. The appeal to Matthew 10 cuts two ways: though mission was first restricted to the Twelve, it is clear that Jesus was looking beyond

the Twelve to all true disciples, who without exception must confess him before men (10:32-33).

Mat 32 "Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven.

Mat 33 But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven.

3. Another restrictive interpretation is given by relying on Matthew 18,

Mat 18:10 "See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven.

Mat 18:14 In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost.

Gay, La Sor and others, hold that three mutually exclusive groups are involved:

- (i) those outside the Christian community who think they are part of it,
- (ii) those inside the community but not the "*little ones*,"
- (iii) the "*little ones*" within the community.

*The basis for judgment is the attitude of professing believers to the "little ones," Jesus' favorites.* The judgment is therefore not the judgment of the nations ("It would be unfair and illogical to judge the unrepentant who have never made any commitment to Jesus and know nothing of the demands of the Kingdom on the same basis"). But Matthew 18 does not support Gay's tripartite distinction, and 12:46-50 makes it clear that Jesus' brothers are his disciples. Moreover the language of vv. 31-32, 46, including a reference to "*all the nations*" gathered before the Son of Man "on his throne in heavenly glory," cannot easily be made to apply to anything as restricted as Gay suggests.

4. Dispensationalist writers see a reference to the Second Coming, after the church has been removed at the Rapture. Jesus' "*brothers*" are Jews who have been converted during the Tribulation; and the "*nations*" are converted Gentiles (the "*sheep*") because they side with the converted Jews during this period.

But unconverted Gentiles (the "*goats*") continue to oppose Jesus' brothers Jews converted during the Tribulation). The sheep enter the millennial kingdom with Jesus' "*brothers*." "All the nations" (v. 32) therefore excludes Jews--though it is doubtful whether the same interpretation would be pressed in 28:18-20.

There is no such pinpointing in the passage itself. *Jesus never speaks of Jews as his brothers, though he does speak of his disciples in that way (12:46-50).*

5. By far the best interpretation is that Jesus' "brothers" are his disciples (Matt 12:48-49; 28:10; cf. 23:8). The fate of the nations will be determined by how they respond to Jesus' followers, who, "missionaries" or not, are charged with spreading the gospel and do so in the face of hunger, thirst, illness, and imprisonment. Good deeds done to Jesus' followers, even the least of them, are not only works of compassion and morality but reflect where people stand in relation to the kingdom and to Jesus himself.

#### The Pericope of the Sheep and the Goats

Strictly speaking, this passage is not a parable. Its only parabolic elements are the shepherd, the sheep, the goats, and the actual separation. It is a picture of things to come.

31 Nowhere in this discourse does Jesus explicitly identify the "Son of Man" (see on 8:20) with himself (24:27, 30, 37, 39, 44). But since this epithet is used in answer to the question "What will be the sign of your coming?" (24:3), the inference is inescapable. There are clear allusions to Zechariah 14:5 (cf. also Dan 7; Joel 3:1-12);

Zec 14:5 You will flee by the valley of My mountains, for the valley of the mountains will reach to Azel; yes, you will flee just as you fled before the earthquake in the days of Uzziah king of Judah. Then the LORD, my God, will come, and all the holy ones with Him!

Dan 7:13 "I kept looking in the night visions, And behold, with the clouds of heaven One like a Son of Man was coming, And He came up to the Ancient of Days And was presented before Him.

Dan 7:14 "And to Him was given dominion, Glory and a kingdom, That all the peoples, nations and men of every language Might serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion Which will not pass away; And His kingdom is one Which will not be destroyed.

but the role of eschatological Judge is, like many other things (see 13:37-39), transferred without hesitation from Yahweh to Jesus. The Son of Man will come "in his heavenly glory" (cf. 16:27; 24:30; 1Thess 4:16; 2Thess 1:8); He sits on his throne, not only as Judge, but as King (see v. 34); for all of divine authority is mediated through him (28:18; cf. 1Cor 15:25; Heb 12:2).

#### **32-33**

After the fulfillment of Matt 24:14.

Mat 24:14 "This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all the nations, and then the end will come.

"All the nations" (*panta ta ethne*, ἔμπροσθεν αὐτοῦ πάντα τὰ ἔθνη All the nations will be gathered before him v. 32) means "all peoples" and clearly implies that "all the nations" includes more than Gentiles only (see on 28:18-20). As the gospel of the kingdom is preached to Gentiles as well as Jews, so also must all stand before the King.

As the shepherd separates (*aphorisei* ἀφορίζει). A common figure in Palestine. The sheep are usually white and the goats black. There are kids (*eriphōn* ἐρίφων goats.) which have grazed together. In the countryside sheep and goats mingled during the day. At night they were often separated: sheep tolerate the cool air, but goats have to be herded together for warmth. The shepherd stands at the gate and taps the sheep to go to the right and the goats to the left.

The well-known, simple, pastoral details are filled with symbolism. The right hand is the place of power and honor.

**34-40** *You did it to me* (*emoi epoihsate emoi epoihsate*). Dative of personal interest. Christ identifies himself with the needy and the suffering. This conduct is proof of possession of love for Christ and likeness to him.

The change from "Son of Man" (8:20) to "King" (vv. 31, 34) is not at all unnatural; for the Son of Man in Daniel 7:13-14 approaches the Ancient of Days to receive "a kingdom," and here that kingdom is consummated (see 24:30). Yet Jesus still associates his work with his Father, something he loves to do (10:32-33; 11:25-27; 15:13; 16:17, 27; 18:10, 19; 20:23; 26:29, 53; and many references in John). He addresses the sheep, "Come, you who are blessed *by my Father*" (v. 34). "Blessed" is not *makarioi* μακάριοι (as in 5:3) but *eulogemenoi* εὐλογημένοι (as in 21:9; 23:39). They are "blessed" inasmuch as they now take their inheritance (Rom 8:17; Rev 21:7), which presupposes a relationship with the Father. That inheritance is the kingdom (see on 3:2) prepared for them "since the creation of the world" (John 17:24; Eph 1:4; 1 Peter 1:20). This glorious inheritance; the consummated kingdom, was the Father's plan for them from the beginning.

The reason they are welcomed and invited to take their inheritance is that they have served the King's brothers (cf. Isa 58:7).

The reason for admission to the kingdom in this parable is more evidential than causative. This is suggested by the surprise of the righteous

When he is questioned, the King replies that doing the deeds mentioned to the least of his brothers is equivalent to doing it to him (v. 40), and by implication to refuse help to the King's brothers is sacrilege (Calvin).

**41-45** The condemnation is even more awful than in Matt 7:23. The "goats" are cursed: they are banished from the King's presence and sent to the eternal fire (v. 41). Hell is here described in categories familiar to Jews (see on 3:12; 5:22; 18:8; cf. Jude 7; Rev 20:10-15). The kingdom was prepared for the righteous (v. 34). Hell was prepared for the Devil (see on 4:1) and his angels (demons; see on 8:31; cf. Jude 6; Rev 12:7) but now also serves as the doom of those guilty of the sins of omission of which Jesus here speaks: they have refused to show compassion to King Messiah through helping the least of his brothers. There is no significance in the fact that the "goats" address Jesus as "Lord" (v. 44);  
No meat (ouk edwkate moi pagein). You did not give me anything to eat. The repetition of the negative ou in [Psalms 42](#) and [Psalms 43](#) is like the falling of clods on the coffin or the tomb. It is curious the surprise here shown both by the sheep and the goats. Some sheep will think that they are goats and some goats will think that they are sheep.

More important is the surprise of the sheep (vv. 37-39) and the goats (v. 44), a major part of the parable, though rarely discussed.

Three things can be said with confidence.

1. Contrary to what some have suggested (e.g., Gay, "Judgment of Gentiles"), neither the sheep nor the goats are surprised at the place the King assigns them but at the reason he gives for this--viz., that they are admitted or excluded on the basis of how they treated Jesus. Thus there is no need to say the goats expected to be welcomed or the sheep expected to be rejected.
2. The surprise of the righteous makes it impossible to think that works of righteousness win salvation. How the sheep and the goats treated Jesus' brothers was not for the purpose of being accepted or rejected by the King. The sheep did not show love to gain an eschatological reward nor did the goats fail to show it to flout eschatological retribution.
3. The parable therefore presents a test eliminating the possibility of hypocrisy. If the goats

had thought that their treatment of Jesus' "brothers" would gain them eschatological reward, they would doubtless have treated them compassionately. But Jesus is interested in a righteousness of the whole person, a righteousness from the heart (see on 5:20; 13:52).

Those who have little sympathy for the gospel of the kingdom will remain indifferent and, in so doing, reject King Messiah. So Paul learned at his conversion! Determined to persecute Christians, he heard the Voice from the heavenly glory declaring, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting" (Acts 9:5).

We must not think that the Bible is unconcerned for the poor and the oppressed (Deut 15:11; Matt 22:37-40; 26:11; Gal 2:10). But that is not the center of interest here.

**46** The same word "eternal" (αἰώνιον *aionion*) modifies "punishment" as modifies "life." *Aionion* αἰώνιον can refer to life or punishment in the age to come, or it can be limited to the duration of the thing to which it refers (as in 21:19). But in apocalyptic and eschatological contexts, the word not only connotes "pertaining to the [messianic] age" but, because that age is always lived in God's presence, also "everlasting"

The final separation of "sheep" and "goats" is a recurring theme in the New Testament, including Matthew (e.g., 7:21-23; 13:40-43).

John Atkinson

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