

Jesus' Parables in Chronological Order

Parable #46 — Matthew 25:31-46 — The Sheep and the Goats

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. 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. ³³ He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

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. 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, 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.’

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? ³⁸ When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? ³⁹ When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’

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.’

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. ⁴² For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 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.’

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?’

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.’

⁴⁶ “Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”

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Note: Some Biblical scholars regard these verses as a parable; others call it a word picture of the last judgement. It doesn't matter; what matters is the message that Jesus wants us to take from it to impact our lives today.

1. Where will all the nations be at Christ's return? (25:31-32) He says he will divide all peoples as a Shepherd does what? Is it difficult to separate sheep from goats?
2. What will Jesus say to those on his right (the sheep)?
3. How will the sheep respond to Jesus' words on that day? (25:37-39) How does Jesus respond to their questions? (25:40)
4. What did Jesus say to those on his left (the goats)? How did they reply? How did Jesus reply to them?
5. How do people today usually determine whether they will be nice to someone?
6. How would your behavior change if you treated every person in your life as if he or she was Jesus?
7. In several recent parables, Jesus emphasizes being faithful and using your gifts (talents, minas, watchful servants) but didn't say what that means. Here he lists six specific things that we are to do. They are:
8. Who are the people gathered before Jesus in this final judgement: gentiles, Jews, Samaritans, believers, non-believers, all humanity?
9. Who are the needy or "the least of my brothers" that we are to serve? (Proverbs 19:17, Matthew 10:40-42, 12:46-50)
10. This story sounds as if Jesus is saying that he is going to judge us based on our works, on our deeds. But surely we're saved by our faith, not by works? Surely it doesn't depend on what we do, does it? (James 2:14-18)
11. What specific act of kindness toward a needy person can you do today?

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8. The identity of those who are gathered is disputed, but it is probably all humanity. The passage belongs to a long section full of stories and examples for believers and one might expect here a solemn appeal to those within the church. Several commentators call this the “Gentile Judgement,” but in the passage itself I find no support for this limitation.

9. Bob Wilkin of the Grace Evangelical Society says in no uncertain terms that this is the Judgement of the Gentiles and that “the sheep are praised and inherit the kingdom. The goats are rebuked and cast into hell. The cause for praise or rebuke is how the Gentiles in question treated believing Jews during the Tribulation.” (<http://www.faithalone.org/index.html>)

A number of other commentators write convincingly that “these brothers of mine” refers to other believers: pastors, missionaries, Christian workers. David Couchman of Facing the Challenge (<http://www.facingthechallenge.org>) says, “Let’s take a moment to look at a couple of earlier places in Matthew’s Gospel that help us to understand who Jesus has in mind here. In Matthew 10, Jesus is sending out his disciples on a training mission. This is what he says to them:

‘He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives the one who sent me.’ (Matthew 10:40-42)

So here, Jesus is talking to his own followers, and he says, ‘he who receives you receives me.’ That is the same thought as in Matthew 25. Then in Matthew chapter 12:, ‘While Jesus was still talking to the crowd, his mother and brothers stood outside, wanting to speak to him. Someone told him, ‘Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.’ He replied to him, ‘Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?’ Pointing to his disciples, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.’ (Matthew 12:46-50)

Back to chapter 25: If we put these two quotations together with what Jesus says in chapter 25, we can see that he is talking about his own people, his true family. He's talking about Christian believers.

I personally do not believe this and I identify the “least of these” with the needy in general. This is consistent with Jesus’ commands to ignore distinctions between insiders and outsiders and with Jesus’ injunction to love one’s enemies. The concept of this kind of service has its roots in the Old Testament in Proverbs 19:17, “Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord and will be repaid in full.” What is new here is the Son of Man’s identification with the needy.

10. James 2:14-18 ‘What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, ‘Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. But someone will say, ‘You have faith; I have deeds.’ Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do.’

So... if you are relying on your faith in Jesus to save you on judgment day, but you are carrying on living the same kind of selfish life as the people around you who don’t believe in him, watch out. Watch out. The Bible doesn’t give you any reassurance at all that you will really be saved.

Good works aren’t the reason we’re saved; but they are the evidence that we’re saved. We’ve talked about this before, but let me state it again, ‘If you were put on trial for being a follower of Christ, would there be enough evidence to convict you?’

Jesus is saying here in Matthew 25 that on judgment day, he will look for evidence that we belong to him—evidence in how we’ve treated the least of his brothers and sisters.