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Matthew 25:31-46 The Sheep and the Goats

Introduction

The section of Scripture of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25:31-46 is a literary example where Jesus uses an illustration of what a shepherd does in terms of separating sheep from goats to explain what the final judgment will be like to His disciples. To understand this passage of Scripture, it is incumbent to probe the broader context of judgment and bring all of Scripture to bear on this subject. First, a thematic view of Matthew will be outlined. Next, the Old Testament will be cited where the literary forms used in Matthew 25:31-46 are repeated. Matthew has an important tie to the Old Testament. It is impossible to understand the full gravitas of this passage without seeing the broader context of Matthew and its connection to the Old Testament.

Broader Context

Even though Matthew's name does not appear as the author, it is widely accepted that he wrote this Gospel, circa 60-61 A.D.¹ The main theme is Jesus is the true Messiah, the continuation of the story of God and Israel. Louis Barbieri has identified two reasons why Matthew wrote his Gospel. He noted, "First he wanted to show unbelieving Jews that Jesus is the Messiah. Second, Matthew wrote to encourage Jewish believers."² The theme of a Jewish audience is shown as Matthew depicts a parallel with Jesus and Moses as Christ came out of Egypt, went through the wilderness, and delivered His Law on the mountain as Yahweh did in the Old Testament.

¹ Michael J. Wilkins, *Matthew. Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2016), <https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.biola.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=1781141&site=eds-live&scope=site>. Introduction.

² Louis A. Barbieri, Jr. "Matthew," *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures by Dallas Seminary Faculty, New Testament*, eds., John Walvoord, Roy Zuck (Colorado Springs, CO: ChariotVictor Publishing, 1983), 16.

The importance of reading this portion of Scripture and connecting it to the Old Testament cannot be overstated. Since Jesus was Jewish as well as the majority of those who heard Him speak as well, it is congruent that Old Testament allusions were in His public discourses. Sherman Gray has documented the references to the Old Testament and the Apocrypha in Matthew 25:31-46 as follows (note these are not exact quotations from the Old Testament but allusions):

- v 31 Dan 7:13; Deut 32:43, 33:2, LXX; Zech 14:5.
1 Enoch, 61:8, 62:2-3; 69:27, 29
- 32 Dan 7:14, Joel 4:12, Eze 34:17, 20
- 33 Eze 34:17, 20
- 34 Ps 109:1; Isa 65:23
- 35a Isa 58:7; Eze 18:7, 16; Tob 4:16
- 35c Isa 58:7; Job 31:32
- 36a Eze 18:7, 16; Tob 4:16
- 36b Sir 7:35 similarity of idea but no verbal correspondence
- 40 Prov 19:17 similarity of idea but no verbal correspondence
- 41 Ps 6:9 similarity of idea but no verbal correspondence
- 42 Job 22:7
- 46 Dan 12:2.³

Gray has chosen to include sources in the Apocrypha which the first century Jews would have recognized. This paper, nor is Gray endorsing the inspiration of the Apocrypha.

The Gospel of Matthew has a flow to it that is easy to outline. For example, R.T. France has highlighted the themes of Matthew as follows:

Chapters 1-4 The Person of Jesus the Messiah,
Chapters 4:17-16:20, the Proclamation of Jesus the Messiah,
Chapters 16:21-28:20 the suffering death and Resurrection of Jesus the Messiah.⁴

³ Sherman, W. Gray. *The Least of My Brothers: Matthew 25, 31-46: a History of Interpretation* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1989), 6-7.

⁴ R.T. France, *Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary* (Westmont: InterVarsity Press, 2008), ProQuest Ebook Central. 20g.

Notice the main word in France's thematic division of Matthew is "Messiah." That is a Jewish concept written primarily to a Hebrew audience. Not only did the Jews have a concept of Messiah, but they also had views concerning the final judgment.

The concept of judgment at the eschaton, especially with sheep and goats is not new to Matthew. For example, Ezekiel 34:17 notes,¹⁷ "As for you, my flock, thus says the Lord God: Behold, I judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and male goats." And the concept of the left side being equated with evil is also found in the Old Testament. It is no coincidence in Jesus' story of the future judgment the wicked are on the left hand of Him. Jerome notes we must, "understand it in accordance with what you read elsewhere: 'The heart of a wise man is on his right hand, and the heart of a fool is on his left.'"⁵ Here, Jerome is quoting Ecclesiastes 10:2 where a fool's heart is described as leaning to his left hand. Jerome sees it as Jesus using a metaphorical reference to Ecclesiastes to describe the behavior of the wicked placed at Christ's left hand as foolish.

The concept of an exhortation to alertness for the return of Christ starts in Matthew 24:36 and it runs through 25:46. David Turner notes,

From now on, his goal is not to provide additional information to answer the disciples' question (24:3) but to exhort them on the proper response to that information. This may not be what the disciples want to know. This material is mainly parabolic. The first (24:36-42) and the last (25:31-46) sections are not parables, but both use quasi-parabolic comparisons (24:37-39; 25:32).⁶

Turner classifies this section of Scripture (Matt 25:31-46) on the sheep and the goats as not being a parable. In other words, Jesus will literally separate people at His Second

⁵ Jerome, *Commentary on Matthew: The Fathers of the Church*. (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 289. <https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.biola.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000xna&AN=500935&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

⁶ David, L. Turner, *Matthew: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 587.

Coming. Other than verse 32 as Turner argues, the passage lacks the style of a parable or allegory (i.e., the second coming is like...). This section of Scripture is more than a parable, it is a divine reality.

The scholars are divided on the issue of whether this portion of Scripture under analysis should be classified as a “parable.” For example, Craig Blomberg concerning these verses notes, “One passage in the canonical Gospels is often called a parable but often not included in books on parables, even those that are otherwise reasonably comprehensive.”⁷ Blomberg includes the story of the sheep and goats in his book on parables because it has a “parabolic flavor” to it.⁸ This assessment is correct as even though it mentions people as “sheep” and “goats,” after the initial reference of this metaphor, it is not repeated. R.T. France also concurs this portion of Scripture is “sometimes misleadingly described as a ‘parable.’”⁹ A.W. Argyle argues, “This is strictly not a parable, but rather a picture which forms a climax to the last of the five great discourses.”¹⁰ Thankfully, whether this is strictly speaking a parable is a secondary doctrine where Christians can agree to disagree. It has parabolic elements, but it is a picture of what *will* happen at the eschaton.

Immediate Context

The eschatological theme of Matthew 25:31-46 of a future judgment of sheep and goats begins in Matthew chapter 24 where the apostles ask Jesus for clarification on His remark (24:2) that, “there will not be left here one stone upon another, that will not be thrown down.” Here,

⁷ Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Oxford: Intervarsity Press, 2012), 397. Proquest Ebook Central.

⁸ Ibid., 397.

⁹ R. T. France, *Matthew*, chapter 4, page 30

¹⁰ A.W. Argyle, *The Cambridge Bible Commentary on the New English Bible: The Gospel According to Matthew* eds., P.R. Ackroyd, A.R.C. Leaney, J.W. Packer, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 193.

Jesus was referring to the Temple which eventually was destroyed in 70 A.D. R.T. France provides a cogent summary of the context of this portion of Matthew's Gospel when he notes:

This is the fifth and last of the great 'discourses' or collections of Jesus' teaching, marked off by the recurrent concluding formula found in 7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1 and 26:1. Its theme is the future 25:1– 30; repercussions of His ministry, the ultimate consummation of the kingdom of heaven. Central to this passage is the theme of judgment: judgment on Jerusalem, in 24:1– 35; the judgment associated with the parousia, in 24:36– 51; two great parables of judgment, in 25:1-30; and the scene of final judgment in 25:31-46.¹¹

What France is saying is the theme of judgment is paramount in chapters 24 and 25 as it relates not only to 70 A.D., but His future Parousia. France also mentioned that judgment was a theme even as far back as chapter 23.¹² In fact, the theme of a public judgment is found throughout Matthew (cf. 5:20, 21, 27: 7:2, 22; 11:22; 12:36; 39, 49-50).

Jesus begins this section of Scripture using the conjunction "when" (Matt 25:31) as a *linkage of continuation* regarding the parable of the talents (Matt 25:14-30). While one of the themes of the parable of the talents is faithfulness, i.e., the illustration ends with judgment on a worthless servant which ends with (vs. 30), "weeping and gnashing of teeth." The beginning of Matthew 25 starts with the judgment on Israel, "as in the parable of the 10 Virgins (vv. 1-13) and the Parable of the talents (vv. 14-30) but also to the Gentiles."¹³ The transition is from judgment on unbelieving Israel which happened in 70 A.D. to the future eschaton where Jesus will separate sheep from goats in *all* nations! There is a contrast between the parable of the talents where, "the judgment may be delayed,"¹⁴ and the setting of the final judgment of sheep and goats where the text fails to mention a time of waiting for the Master to return.

¹¹ R.T. France, *Matthew an Introduction*

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Louis A. Barbieri, Jr, "Matthew," *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 80.

¹⁴ A. W. Argyle, *The Cambridge Bible Commentary on the New English Bible: The Gospel According to Matthew* eds. P.R. Ackroyd, A.R.C. Leaney, J.W. Packer (NY: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 191.

Establish the Text:

Mt 25	NASB	NKJV	NIV	NRSV	NEB	NLT	Message
31	But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne.	When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory.	No significant difference.	"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory.	He will sit in state on His throne.	No significant difference.	When he finally arrives, blazing in beauty and all his angels with him, then he will take his place on his glorious throne.
32	And all the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them one from another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.	No difference.	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.	All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats,	With all the nations gathered before Him. He will separate men into groups, as shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.	All the nations ^l will be gathered in his presence , and he will separate the people as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.	Then all the nations will be arranged before him and he will sort the people out much as a shepherd sorts out sheep and goats,
33	And He will put the sheep on His right, and the goats on His left.	No significant difference.	No significant difference.	No significant difference.	And He will place the sheep on his right hand and the goats on his left.	No significant difference.	putting sheep to his right and goats to his left.
34	Then the King will say to those on His right, 'Come you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.	No significant difference.	"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.	No significant difference.	Then the King will say to those on his right hand, " You have my Father's blessing; come, enter and possess the kingdom that has been ready for you since the world was made.	From the creation of the world.	Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Enter, you who are blessed by my Father!

35	'For I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave me drink; I was a stranger, and you invited me in;	'For I was hungry and you gave me food ; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you took me in;	Adds "something" to drink.	and you gave me food , I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me,	For when I was hungry, you gave me food ; when thirsty, you gave me drink; when I was stranger you took me into your homeAnd you fed me. Into your home	I was hungry and you fed me, I was thirsty and you gave me a drink. I was homeless and you gave me a room.
36	'Naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.'	'I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.'	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.	I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.'	When naked you clothed me; when I was ill you came to my help , when in prison you visited me.	I was naked, and you gave me clothing. I was sick, and you cared for me. I was in prison, and you visited me.'	I was shivering and you gave me clothes. I was sick and you stopped to visit, I was in prison and you came to me.
37	"Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, 'Lord when did we see You hungry, and feed you, or thirsty and give You drink?'	No difference!	Omits "saying"	No significant difference.	Then the righteous will reply , "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and fed you, or thirsty and gave you drink,	These righteous will reply	Then those sheep are going to say, 'Master, what are you talking about? When did we see you hungry and feed you, thirsty and give you a drink?'
38	'And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You?'	'When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You?'	Omits "and". And needing clothes.	And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing ?	a stranger and took you home , or naked and clothed you?	Or a stranger and show you hospitality? Or naked and give you clothing?	And when did we ever see you sick or in prison and come to you?
39	'And when did we see You sick, or in prison and come to You?'	No difference.	Omits "and" And go visit you?	and visited you?'	When did we see you ill or in prison, and come to visit you?" And visit you?		MISSING in The Message
40	"And the King will answer and say to them,	And the King will answer and	The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for		...I tell you this: anything	"And the King will say, 'I tell	Then the king will say, 'I'm

	'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.'	say to them, ' Assuredly , I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren , you did it to Me.'	one of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'	who are members of my family,	you did for one of one of my brothers here, however humble , you did for me.	you the truth, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, ^{if} you were doing it to me!'	telling the solemn truth: Whenever you did one of these things to someone overlooked or ignored, that was me- you did it to me.'
41	Then He will also say to those on His left, 'Depart from Me, accursed ones , into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels;	Then He will also say to those on the left hand, 'Depart from Me you cursed into the everlasting fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels.	You who are cursed. Omits "which has been."	No significant difference.	Adds "hand." The curse is upon you; go from my sight to the eternal fire that is ready for the devil and his angels.	"Then the King will turn to those on the left and say, 'Away with you, you cursed ones, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his demons	Then He will turn to the goats, the one on his left and say 'get out' worthless goats You're good for nothing but the fires of hell and why because-
42	for I was hungry, and you gave Me nothing to eat; I was thirsty and you gave Me nothing to drink;	for I was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink;	No significant difference.	you gave me no food ,	When thirsty nothing to drink;	You didn't feed	I was hungry and you gave me no meal. I was thirsty and you gave me no drink
43	I was a stranger, and you did not invite Me in; naked and you did not clothe Me; sick, and in prison, and you did not visit Me.'	Take me in.	I needed clothes You did not look after me.	Welcome me	Adds "when" You gave me no home. When naked you did not clothe me. When I was ill and in prison you did not come to my help.	I was a stranger, and you didn't invite me into your home. I was naked, and you didn't give me clothing. I was sick and in prison, and you didn't visit me.'	I was homeless and you gave me no bed. I was shivering and you gave me no clothes. Sick and in prison and you never visited.
44	Then they themselves will also answer, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry, or thirsty, or a	Omits "themselves" Adds "Him"	They will also answer...		And they too will reply, "Lord when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a	"Then they will reply, 'Lord, when did we ever see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or	Then those goats are going to say, 'Master what are you talking about? When did

	stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not take care of You?"	And did not minister to You?"	Or needing clothes...		stranger or naked or ill in prison, and did nothing for you?"	naked or sick or in prison, and not help you?"	we ever see you hungry or thirsty or homeless or shivering or in prison and didn't help?
45	"Then He will answer them saying, 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.'	Assuredly I say to you inasmuch as	"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.'	Eliminates "extent"	And he will answer, "I tell you this: anything you did not do for one of these, however humble, you did not do for me."	"And he will answer, 'I tell you the truth, when you refused to help the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were refusing to help me.'	He will answer them 'I'm telling the solemn truth: Whenever you failed to do one of these things to someone who was being overlooked or ignored, that was me- you failed to do it to me.'
46	"And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life"	everlasting punishment	"Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."	No significant difference.	No significant difference.	No significant difference.	Then the goats will be herded to their eternal doom, but the sheep to their eternal reward.

The differences between the above translations are *generally* minor in nature. They are as follows; in v.31 The Message adds adjectives not in the Greek text, i.e. "blazing in beauty." The NEB has Christ sitting in "state" on His throne. There are no significant differences in verses 32 and 33. However, in verse 34, the NIV renders it "take your inheritance" almost if it is something the saints do. The other translations seem in the more passive voice i.e., "inherit the kingdom." Also, the NEB renders it "blessing of my Father" and the other have it past tense "blessed by my Father." A "blessing" can almost sound temporary (i.e., what a blessing it was to see you) even though the context of eternity otherwise would rule that out. In verse 35, the more literal NASB says the needy needed "something to eat" and several have the need as "food."

In verse 36, *The Message* takes poetic liberty and mentions the needy were “shivering.” The other translations just say they were naked. Again, in verse 37, *The Message* is wordy adding, “Master what are you talking about?” This wording is not in the Greek text. Lastly, verse 39 is missing in The Message version. But overall, the differences in more dynamic equivalent translations are within the pale of orthodoxy. In other words, there are no heretical views espoused within their poetic liberty.

Within the Paragraph

In this passage Jesus uses common animals (sheep and goats) to teach His disciples about the future judgment of all mankind. The main idea of the passage is true followers of Christ while they wait for His return will unknowingly serve their brothers and sisters in the Lord by doing good works for them. David Cortes Fuentes outlines this passage to illustrate its parallel nature as follows:

Introduction: The glorious coming of the Son of man (v 31)

- I. The great separation (w 32-33)
- II. Dialogue Between the King and the Judged (vv 34-45)
 - A. The reward of those at the right hand (w 34-40)
 - 1. The reward (v. 34)
 - 2. Its grounds (vv. 35-36)
 - 3. The protest (vv. 37-39)
 - 4. The principle (v 40)
 - B. The judgment of those at the left hand (vv. 41-45)
 - 1. The judgment (v 41)
 - 2. Its Grounds (vv.42-43)
 - 3. The protest (v 44)
 - 4. The principle (v 45)

Conclusion: The final division (v 46)¹⁵

¹⁵ David Cortés-Fuentes “The Least of These My Brothers: Matthew 25:31-46.” *Apuntes* 23 (3): 100–109. <https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.biola.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rfh&AN=ATLA0001381236&site=eds-live&scope=site>. 104-105.

This section of Scripture can be further broken down into a chiastic structure to illustrate this pericope. David Turner breaks it down as follows:

Setting: Glorious return of the Son of Man expressed metaphorically: Sheep on the right and goats on the left (25:31-33)
Judgment of the sheep (25:34-40)
Judgment of the goats (25:41-45)
Destiny of the goats: Eternal punishment (25:46a)
Destiny of the sheep: Eternal life (25:46b)¹⁶

Issues/Commentaries and Exposition

This passage of Scripture has been intensely debated by scholars. Sherman W. Gray has counted at least 32 finely nuanced interpretations of this section of Scripture.¹⁷ While this section of analysis cannot cover all 32 nuanced interpretations, David Turner has boiled it down to three *major* interpretations for the overall pericope. All three views have the final judgment in mind, but the first view makes, “salvation depend on one’s efforts” to help those in need.¹⁸ Turner goes on to note the second view is held within classic Dispensationalism and the “judgment is how the nations have treated the Jews during their persecution by the antichrist.”¹⁹ The third major view sees the “least of these” as either Christians in general or missionaries and the true sheep will show they are saved by their good works towards these believers.²⁰ The third view is the most widely held one in church history and the way in which this paper will analyze this section of Scripture.

Jesus introduces this pericope right on the heels of the condemnation of the lazy servant (vs. 30). Previously, Jesus’ main emphasis in the leadup was the subject of alertness in terms of

¹⁶ David, L. Turner, *Matthew*, 603.

¹⁷ Sherman, W. Gray. *The Least of My Brothers: Matthew 25, 31-46: a History of Interpretation* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1989) as qtd in, David Cortés-Fuentes “The Least of These My Brothers: Matthew 25:31-46,” 105.

¹⁸ David L. Turner, *Matthew*, 604.

¹⁹ Ibid., 605.

²⁰ Ibid., 605.

His return. Keeping in step with His Parousia, Jesus now focuses on the concept of compassion and how true believers will show evidence of their faith. This pericope forces the interpreter to wrestle with the concept of faith and good works. In other words, from a Biblical perspective, the interpreter must answer the question, “How do faith and works relate to one another?” As noted above, one thematic view of this section of Scripture sees salvation as something one earns for doing the good works mentioned by Jesus. This view, however, when looking at the totality of Jesus’ teaching in Matthew. For example, earlier in chapter 20:28, Matthew records Jesus as saying He “came to give His life as a ransom for many.” And right after the pericope of sheep and goats, Jesus said (Matthew 26:28) that His blood “is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” Also, the view of good works meriting salvation in this passage fails to consider the context is eschatology and not soteriology. In other words, this section is not a didactic treatise on the mechanics of soteriology. Otherwise, Matthew would be contradicting himself.

The Dispensational view of this passage interprets “the least of these” as Jews who lived during an alleged future seven-year period called the Great Tribulation.²¹ According to this view, the judgment will be on the Gentile nations and how they treated the Jews during this period and the alleged rising of an antichrist (singular) and his persecution of Israel.²² While this view is admirable for stressing a connection between faith and works, it has been weighed and found wanting because Matthew never teaches a developed series of several Dispensational judgments. Also, the “criterion of judgment is not their attitude towards Israel, or even God’s law, but their treatment of Jesus’ ‘little brothers.’”²³ This paper holds to the third view, the dominant one in church history, and will examine the details of the rest of this passage with that mindset.

²¹ David, L. Turner, *Matthew*, 605.

²² Louis Barbieri The Bible Knowledge Commentary “Matthew” 80.

²³ France, *Matthew*, Chapter 4, p. 31.

In verse 31, Jesus begins by alluding to Himself as the “Son of Man.” This title would be familiar to first century Jews because it was used by the prophet Daniel. In Daniel chapter 7 the Son of Man was not merely a human, but an exalted figure who, “receives world dominion and worship.”²⁴ Jesus refers to Himself multiple times throughout the Gospels in the third person as the “Son of Man.” What is noteworthy however, is Jesus’ change from calling Himself “Son of Man” to (vs. 34) “King.” Concerning this connection, Argyle notes the Hebrew titles for Jesus used in Matthew as, “the King, The Son of Man, the Messiah in His glory.”²⁵ Argyle is correct in his understanding, for elsewhere in Scripture we notice the Jews made the connection at the trial of Jesus when He used the title “Son of Man” (Matt 26:64-65) and they considered it blasphemy.

Another interpretative issue that has been debated is the meaning of “all the nations.” As noted earlier, the classic Dispensational view holds that “all the nations” excludes Israel. But there is no indication in the immediate context of the final Parousia of the concept of separate judgments.

The phrase “the least of these my brothers” (v. 40) is another interpretative and textual issue that is debated among Christians. First, as Fuentes notes, “Some ancient manuscripts omit the words “my brothers” (τὸν adelphὸν μου). This omission is most likely the result of the influence of the absence of these words in V 45.” However, Fuentes only noted “some” and not *most* ancient manuscripts omit “my brothers.” Second, all the translations examined above have some sort of rendering of it (NASB, “brothers of mine,” NKJV, “my brethren,” NIV, “these brothers of mine.” etc.). It would be highly improbable that all the scholars of the above translations were in error regarding this.

²⁴ Ligonier Ministries notes on Matthew, *Reformation Study Bible*: (ESV, R.C. Sproul et al., eds Orlando, FL: Ligonier Ministries, 2005), 1374.

²⁵ Argyle, *Matthew*, 193.

Now, given the evidence that “least of these my brothers” is in the text, the meaning of this phrase has been disputed. Turner notes the identity of these “brothers” is “the watershed of the entire discussion. In Matthew a brother (*adelphos*) is a sibling, either biologically (1:2, 11; 4:18, 21; 12:46-47; 13:55; 14:3; 17:1; 19:29; 20:24; 22:24-25) or spiritually.”²⁶ The context of this word “brother” (*adelphos*) fails to warrant the designation of a mere unregenerate neighbor. R.C. Sproul argues, “It is Christ’s disciples (10:42; 12:48-49), not the poor and needy in general.”²⁷ This view makes sense because the King identifies Himself with the “least of these” in verse 40. As Argyle notes, “Neglect of Christ’s disciples, is neglect of Christ Himself.”²⁸ What Argyle and Sproul are arguing is that Christ so identifies with His people (12:48-49) that their suffering is His suffering and compassion shown to His followers is compassion shown to Him. The disciples are also called “brothers” in Matthew 23:8 and 28:10. In other words, what Jesus is talking about is the attitude of Christians towards other Christians, especially those who are being persecuted and robbed of their goods. But does showing compassion to a follower of Christ mean one is a genuine Christian and therefore one of the sheep on the right hand at the judgment? As mentioned above, this pericope has been interpreted by many scholars to teach salvation by works.²⁹ This view is erroneous and will now be examined.

First, it should be noted that the context of this section of Matthew 24:1-25:46 is one of judgment and ultimately the final eschaton. It is not a didactic treatise on the mechanics of soteriology. In other words, it is not teaching *how* to get saved, but rather the evidence of those sheep who *are* saved. This mindset fits well with not only the entirety of Scripture, but even

²⁶ Turner, *Matthew*, 606.

²⁷ Ligonier Ministries notes on Matthew, *Reformation Study Bible*:1403.

²⁸ Argyle, *The Cambridge Bible Commentary*, 193.

²⁹ Turner, *Matthew*, 604.

within the book of Matthew where in chapter 7 verse 15 he notes the false prophets have done many “mighty works” in the name of Christ and they were “*never*” saved.

Secondly, within the immediate context of this pericope is the notion the sheep come to “*inherit*” the kingdom. The text does not say “they *earned* the kingdom.” These sheep come into a kingdom that has (v. 34) “been prepared from the foundation of the world.” This would mean before the sheep did anything “good,” the kingdom was already prepared for them. This view works not only within the sphere of Reformed soteriology but the prescient view of Arminianism. It could be argued from the Arminian side that God looked down the corridor of time and saw those who would not only choose to receive Christ, but aide His disciples, and therefore since God is outside of time, He “prepared the kingdom” for the sheep in eternity past. Either way, the passage fails to teach salvation is accomplished by human works. Rather, the good works are a byproduct of regeneration taking place in the hearts of the sheep.

The doctrine of eternal punishment is clearly taught in verses 41 and 46. This is significant for portions of the “evangelical” world today deny eternal, conscious punishment via either the doctrine of annihilation (body and soul cease to exist), or universalism (everyone gets saved). For example, Rob Bell notes, “Jesus isn’t talking about forever as we think of ‘forever. Jesus may be talking about something else, which has all sorts of implications for our understanding of what happens after we die.”³⁰ Bell’s book was a bestseller and is indicative of the confusion in the visible church. Since contrast is the mother of clarity, a thorough analysis of the Greek for verse 46 will now be considered thus showing annihilationism and universalism are wrong.

³⁰ Rob Bell, *Love Wins, A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2011), 92.

What is significant to note is the same Greek word for “eternal” (*aiōnion*)³¹ describing heaven for the sheep, is also used to describe punishment for the goats. If one is going to allegorize away eternal conscious punishment with the doctrine of annihilation, then the eternality of heaven is suspect. *Aiōnion* applies *equally* to heaven and hell.

The doctrine of an eternal hell is also taught in Matthew 10:28, “And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.” The Greek word for “destroy” is “*apollumi*” (ἀπόλλυμι) and it was translated in Thayer’s Lexicon as “to devote or give over to eternal misery.”³² What is of significance to note here is that Dr. Thayer was a Unitarian who did not believe in the eternal existence of hell, but he translated the word “destroy” noting “eternal misery.” So, Matthew, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, taught the doctrine of eternal punishment in at least two different places in his Gospel.

To add to the scholarship regarding the usage of “eternal” the great Lutheran theologian Dr. Francis Pieper shared some insight on Matthew 25:46 in *Christian Dogmatics*. Pieper noted, Holy Scripture teaches the truth of an eternal damnation so clearly and emphatically that cannot deny it without, at the same time, rejecting the authority of Scripture. Scripture parallels the eternal salvation of the believers and the eternal damnation of the unbelievers. Whoever therefore denies the one, to be consistent must deny the other (Matthew 25:46). We find the same juxtaposition and antithesis in other passages of Scripture. This parallelism proves that the term eternity in the sense of limited duration as some used in Holy Writ, is inapplicable here.³³

³¹ Robert Young LL. D. *Young’s Analytical Concordance to the Bible* eds., R.K. Harrison, Everett, Falconer Harrison (NY: Funk & Wagnalls, 1972), 311.

³² Joseph, Henry Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Complete and Unabridged* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1885), 64.

³³ Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, n.d.), 3:544-555, as qtd in Walter Martin, *Kingdom of the Cults* ed. Hank Hanegraaff. (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1997), 567.

Pieper and more importantly the Word of God teaches the existence of the soul and eventually the body (at the resurrection) of the regenerate and the unregenerate for all eternity.

In conclusion, Matthew 25:31-46 “portrays the classic judgment associated with the Parousia.”³⁴ This portion of Scripture is not a parable in the conventional sense but rather a fulfillment of Jesus’ words in Matthew 16:27, “For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done.” What is also significant to note is that the sheep and goats are not surprised at the *place* assigned to them but rather the *reason* Jesus gives. This pericope mirrors the Old Testament in that, “In Hebrew poetry, we have no varying of degrees of light and shade. The picture is painted in sharply defined contrasts of black and white. All men fall into one or other of two classes, which are as clearly distinguishable as are sheep and goats to a shepherd.”³⁵ The context is clear, at the eschaton people will either go to the bliss of heaven, or experience eternal punishment. It is also clear; the Lord expects His people to show their faith by their deeds.

Meditation and Application

I grew up in a Roman Catholic environment and was an altar boy and I vividly remember this passage of Scripture and how my mind related it to the creed we used to recite that had the line, “He shall come to judge the living and the dead.” Prior to understanding the imputed righteousness of Christ, I would wonder how I would fare at the judgment described in Matthew 25:31-46. Coming from a Roman Catholic background, my view of salvation was entirely good

³⁴ Gray, *The Least of My Brothers*, 358.

³⁵ R.V. G. Tasker, ed., *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm Eerdmans’s Publishing, 1981), 238.

works. This passage used to scare me because I used to ask myself the question, “Am I doing this for each and every needy person I meet?” And the other question I wrestled with was, “How many good works with each person are enough?” In other words, the text does not say what to do if a needy individual *persistently* needs help. Do I help them just once? Do I empty my bank account and neglect my family to help the needy? It was only after I came to faith in Christ that I realized these acts of charity were evidence of genuine faith and not the cause of it.

So now in hindsight, after being saved 37 years, this assignment has forced me to first look into my memory of the thousands of sermons I heard and to try to recollect if I have been challenged by this portion of Scripture. While the memories of my Roman Catholicism lingered regarding this passage, I cannot honestly recall hearing a sermon on this portion of God’s Word. But upon further reflection, I have several thoughts that are not foreign to Protestant orthodoxy.³⁶

First, let me say upfront, even though I believe the context of the “least of these my brothers” is primarily Christians, I still try to help people who are not believers. This is for two reasons. The first is that it is possible they may still yet come to Christ, and if I help them as this portion of Scripture instructs me to do, I am still helping Christ because they are His people, and I cannot take the chance of saying “no” to anyone (within reason).

Secondly, the other reason why I help people in reference to Matthew 25:31-46 is my love for Christ and even the admonition in Hebrews 12:10 about showing hospitality to people and the saints not knowing they were ministering to angels. I realize angels are foreign to the context of Matthew 25, but it is still an added inducement to do good works.

In terms of further application of this verse I have noticed that in my 37 years of walking with Christ (a great majority of which engaged in apologetics), I have found that people

³⁶ I meditated on this passage four times at one hour each and prayerfully asked the Lord for guidance.

(Christians and unbelievers) will remember me first and foremost for how I treated them. Yes, they may recall doctrinal points in discussion and debates down through the years. But I have discovered it is easier to politely offer a rejoinder to people I disagree with if I am showing them the hospitality mentioned in Matthew 25 (and indeed more than those specific works). I host a monthly men's Theology on Tap and once in a while the subject matter tends to foster "warm scholastics discussions" as one mentor put it. The fact that I open my home, feed the men pizza and drinks, even if we vehemently disagree on *some* things, they keep coming back and we enjoy the fellowship of iron sharpening iron (Prv 27:17).

In my current church I am being looked at for the possibility of being an elder and one of the qualifications is to be hospitable. Basically, what I am saying is "People do not care how much you know (Theology apologetics etc.) until they know how much you care."

In being asked to meditate on this Scripture for four hours I believe I came to a sphere of application that I had never considered in 37 years of walking with Christ. Since I hold to the idea the text is referring to Christians as "the least of these my brothers," it made me think of a potentially different way of looking at ministry. For example, I never thought about me being one of the needy and the Lord knows I've gone through many trials in my years of serving Him and the saints have met my physical, spiritual, and emotional needs. In other words, sometimes we axiomatically place ourselves as either sheep or goats and never being part of the needy. Therefore, I then sometimes head out into apologetics ministry not as the strong but rather as Paul said the weak. The passage that came to mind when I had this epiphany was 2 Cor 12:10, "for when I am weak, then I am strong." I am sure the apostle Paul could relate to the needs of those mentioned in Matthew 25 as he experienced just about all of them (c.f. 2 Cor 11:25-30).

The core message of this passage is God's people will not only love others but receive the love from fellow brothers and sisters in Christ in many ways. Good works will result from our salvation (Phil 2:14) while the unregenerate "goats" may do good deeds, but their motives and hearts are not right before the Lord.

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