

**All Must Heed the Love Command:  
Preaching the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats  
Matthew 25:31-46**

Most of us have lived with Matt 25:31-46 for a long time. In the congregation which nourished me in Australia in my earliest years we had little envelopes available in the back of the pew. Anyone who wished to give to Social Services or Missions could use them at any time. Stamped across one of the envelopes for Social Services was the picture of a rather decrepit person and a verse from Matt 25:40, KJV:

Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these (my brethren) ye have done it unto me.

These words were not only printed on the envelope they have been imprinted on my memory ever since. Something like this is probably true for you today.

So, we have all been round the block with this parable. Yet, it is quite amazing to sense the degree that this verse and this vignette has become disconnected from the wider Christian story that informs this parable – at least in the minds of many in our culture. We regularly encounter people who claim that works of mercy done *outside* the zone of Christian faith are the most worthwhile and beneficial. People who do these works are to be most admired – presumably because they are reckoned to be spontaneous and not informed by religious faith. Indeed, the standard bearers of a certain kind of secularism, if they are interested in Jesus at all, will usually at this point co-opt him as the patron of those who generously show concern for the poor. “That is what Christ was all about,” they say. But that is as far as they will go. The ethically challenged business man who never darkens a church door but who hands out \$50.00 to the man begging on the street corner is viewed as the genuine article. With a wink and a nod, this kind of person is reckoned to be a good model.

I have come regularly to expect to see and hear this perspective in our media. But I was surprised, when visiting out of town some years ago, to hear this same sentiment in a sermon – from one of our graduates no less. This is a reminder that such a position is prevalent even in the church – i.e. that spontaneous help for the poor is real Christianity. It represents real “hands-on” discipleship. Action counts. Connecting it with doctrine taints.

But wait a minute! Given where this parable occurs in Matthew this strikes me as a bit strange. After all, it does come immediately before the Passion Account. It is the climactic ending to the teaching ministry of Jesus! It concludes the final section of seven parables in Jesus’ last discourse which, in turn, function as the last of the famous five discourses in Matthew – the heart and soul of his teaching. At least for Matthew there could not be a teaching of Jesus more strategically placed to underscore the importance of his entire message. Thus, this particular unit is worthy of close attention with respect to Jesus’ entire message. I think we are already getting a hint that there is a bit more to this parable for Jesus than how it is conceived by the ordinary person.

## Matthew's Last Discourse of Jesus

So, let us start with the general context. As noted, this unit concludes Jesus' last or Eschatological Discourse. In my book on this topic I list Matthew's discourse as starting at 24:1. I am aware that others start it as early as the critique of the Pharisees in chapter 23. Indeed, it is important for understanding this parable to note what takes place before chapter 24. In the preceding chapters in Matthew, Jesus is busy giving a series of grave warnings to the leaders of Israel urging them to repent. In Matt 21:43, in the face of widespread rejection, Jesus tells these leaders:

The Kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation (Greek *ethnei*) producing fruits (21:43).

Here the text is not referring to another nation state – but the kind of people to whom the kingdom would be given. These are people, as we shall see, who above all heed the love command. They are the renewed people of God: the Church. In Matthews' world they are the ones who heed the call to return to Zion in anticipation of the ultimate lordship of Jesus and the Twelve. They will replace the leadership of old Israel in the people of God. Right at the end of the blistering critique of the Pharisees in Matthew 23, after the plaintive wail over the current leadership of Israel in Jerusalem, Jesus announces:

Behold your house is forsaken and desolate (23:38).

It is clear from these words and many others that Jesus perceived that God's judgment was about to fall on the leadership of the Israel of his generation. This establishment was about to be replaced by the other people of 21:43. Moving over to the Eschatological Discourse of Matthew 24:1-25:46 Matthew now turns to the destiny of these 'other people.' In short this is where we come in: the people of the 'last days.' We are not immune from a similar critique that was made earlier to Israel.

The unit falls into two major sections. In 24:3-36 there is a discussion of the situation and conditions in Roman Greater Syria between the time of Jesus and the Parousia of the Son of Man. Then Matthew 24:37-25:46 delivers seven parables of warning to the people of the last days: Jesus' disciples need to be prepared and faithful in view of the coming judgment of the Kingdom people at the parousia. These seven parables of warning to the church balance off the seven warnings to the Pharisees in 23:13-33. As already noted the leaders of Israel were about to lose their place in the eschatological arrangement of things. This is underscored in the seven warnings to the Pharisees in chapter 23. Likewise, in the seven parables – and this is crucial – the people in the other nation (the church) are warned that unless they are prepared a similar thing will happen to them at the Parousia. In short, the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats is not a series of piecemeal sayings detaching Jesus from the life of the church and the impact of his total message. In fact it is the exact opposite. Read in context it is a warning to the church. Just as the parables of the Ten Virgins and Talents do the same. In fact, it is similar to the other six parables. If the earliest church did not heed the message of this word, a similar thing would

happen to them along the same lines as happened recently in Jerusalem. We will say more about this message. But we can already say that though this parable is often read as moralistic advice to the Scrooges of society we see that is a mis-reading. Matthew understands it clearly as Jesus' word to the church; although, as we shall see, it has implications for other people as well.

### **Wider Context**

A couple of other important points are in order on context before we take up the parable of the Sheep and Goats itself. First, as many have observed, this parable seems to function as the other side of the coin to Jesus' address to the disciples about their mission to Israel in Matt 10:5-39. Our parable (Matt 25) features a judgment scene of all nations. Of course, Matthew's Mission Discourse initially precludes the Gentiles. The focus is entirely on Israel. So let us talk about that a bit. The Mission Discourse is exclusively to Israel.

Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Matt 10:5).

Thus, the wide scale rejection of Jesus by his own people when he enters Jerusalem is already preceded by a long mission to them. Noticeably, this mission is carried out by the Twelve who are pictured as remarkably vulnerable and in need of hospitality from those who have received their message. Matthew 10:24-25 describes the disciples as embodying the vulnerability and values of their Master in their mission to Israel. In fact, the vulnerability of the Twelve is described in 10:40-42 in words that are very close to what we find in Matthew 25.

And whoever gives to one of these little ones (v. 42, the vulnerable disciples) even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly, I say to you, he shall not lose his reward.

Matthew 10 makes it very clear that when the Son of Man comes to his throne those in Israel who showed hospitality to the disciples will be rewarded. They received Jesus in his messengers. On the other hand, in characteristic Matthean terminology, for the others who rejected the messengers "it will be more tolerable for Sodom than for them." For in rejecting the disciples they have not just rejected some emissaries they have rejected the Master himself. Peter Stuhlmacher points out that, for Matthew, the disciples did not return. That mission to Israel is open and continues when Matthew was written.

It is worthwhile to notice that even in this message to Israel the messengers are not the ones who are judged. It is the recipients of the message themselves. Herein is an important lesson for us. Far too often we in the church view ourselves as being judged by the world with respect to our authenticity. We spend far too much time (in my view) parsing and wondering whether we are meeting society's needs – and thus somehow being relevant. I am not wishing to be critical here. But well over half the articles I see in the *Christian Chronicle* are of this vintage. A little

congregation somewhere meets a societal need and gets two minutes on the evening news of the local TV station. And for this we pat ourselves on the back. We are finally being relevant to the world! For Matthew it is the opposite. Here Israel, and later the nations are to be judged by their response to the Shepherd's message. They are the ones on the line. We should learn from this. We are not running for political office. We are not to frame our message either in the contours of a progressive or conservative agenda to gain popularity in the culture; but we are announcers that Christ is Lord and the lordship of Christ will operate in the new order. Here, ultimately, it is the world that will be accountable.

Speaking about the nations (a central concern of Matthew 25), let us take a quick look at how Matthew brings them into the story as well so that we can understand the total setting in Matthew 25. They too did not just pop out of the air in Matthew. Here we can only be very selective. As early as Matthew 4:15, when Jesus leaves Nazareth and comes to Capernaum, echoing Isa 9:1-2 he says he is bringing a great light to Galilee of the Gentiles. As the hidden and suffering Son of Man who will be rejected, and who will give his life for his people, in Matt 12:17-21, quoting the servant passage in Isa 42:1-4, he announces he is God's servant who will proclaim God's saving power. The heart of the announcement is that this is the time of justice that will emerge in the nations. Now what is unusual about this reference is that it follows the Mission Discourse in the previous chapter. There, you remember, that the disciples are told *not* to go to the Gentiles or Nations. But of course the word in Matthew 12 is anticipatory. This is made clear in 28:16-20. As John Donahue says:

The Son of Man hidden in the least of the brethren (his disciples) is also the Servant who will bring God's justice to victory and in whom the nations (or Gentiles) can hope.

Let us look at this concept "justice," or "righteousness," an important word for Matthew. The concept is already anchored in the Beatitudes. Note that Matthew 5:6-7, the opening words of the beatitudes refer to the ones who will be blessed by Jesus' ministry as "the poor in spirit," and "the merciful." This is right at the outset of Jesus' ministry. Twenty chapters later these concepts are still in focus. We could say Matt 25:31-46 forms an *inclusio* to the beatitudes. There the King speaks about these righteous ones as being merciful to the missionaries by fulfilling the love command to them. The beatitudes end in 5:10-12 with the word that those who do righteousness (another *dikaiois* word) will not be popular with their fellows. They will be a minority. They will be subject to persecution. As Matthew moves on, this word on the demand for righteousness for Israel is eventually extended to the nations or Gentiles. The context of Matt 24:9-14 indicates it will not be an easy ride. The mission to the nations will be bathed in persecution – as we know to this very day. But by Matt 25 it is presumed to bear fruit. The mission of Matt 28:16-20 surfaces people who are prepared to fulfill the love command. And so when the Son of Man comes those who hear the word and respond in keeping with the love commandment, which is the foundation of "all that I have commanded you" will be rewarded. Thus, at last, we turn to Matt 25:31-46.

## Analysis of Matt 25:31-46

Before we go further in the text it should be briefly noted that I take this unit to be a parable. A number of significant commentators have labeled this an apocalyptic description of the final Judgment. This assessment is not to be taken lightly as Graham Stanton and Bultmann are listed among the names that support that position. But I am constrained to refer to it as a parable in much the same way as we take the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus in Lk 16:19-31. Both accounts are based on two vivid pictures. In the Lukan account we have first the rich man blithely ignoring the beggar at his gates. Then we have the reversal of the situation in the hereafter. In Matthew 25 we have also two pictures. First, we have a situation hardly worthy of notice to an ordinary Middle Eastern person. A shepherd is quietly preparing to give his mixed group of animals shelter for the evening. Those who have witnessed this situation tell us that the goats (usually a different color from the sheep) are brought inside and given shelter because they are less hardy on cold nights and tend to stray farther away. Yet, oddly, those left outside the shelter (the sheep) are the ones who will become the analogues for vindication in the parable.

At any rate this almost unnoticed situation is contrasted with an opposite picture: the judgment scene at the end of history. The two pictures could hardly be more different. The coming of the Son of Man is a matter of great fanfare. It is described as a king sitting on a glorious throne allocating to various people the future of their eternal destinies. The interplay of these two pictures provide the basic structure for this account. I call it a parable because I think it is similar to the two previous parables of the wise and foolish virgins and the Talents in Matt 25:1-30. Both of these parables are accounts of different groups of people who either are ready or not ready for the Son of Man's coming. These parables (along with the Sheep and the Goats) provide a triad to end the Eschatological Discourse by giving additional instruction on what we need to be doing as we await the coming of the Son of Man at the end of the age.

The climax of the parable of the Sheep and Goats revolves around the surprises at the judgment. What was done or not done by the nations to the least was also done to the Son of Man (25:40). This we will explain further. But, for now, it is simply worthwhile to point out that the whole function of the Judgment scene is to give to Matthew's hearers or readers a preliminary preview of what will happen at the last day. In true parabolic fashion, by listening in to the preview of what will take place we have the benefit of adjusting our lives so that we will be able to adopt the appropriate lifestyle to receive a favorable result. To me this comes close to how parables are supposed to function. Thus I have no problem in calling Matthew 25:31-46 a parable.

So, if it is a parable, what is its point? What are we to be forewarned about? As we have already seen the parable seeks to throw light on the nature of the Final Judgment. The first thing that must be learned is that this judgment is, in the last analysis, a judgment of individuals. Oh yes, the nation of Israel, as in various other times in its earlier history, according to the prophets had come under Yahweh's wrath and had suffered punishment and survived. According to Matthew, once again this had happened with their rejection of Jesus. The events of 70 A.D. were their punishment. That is a given. But, at the last day it will be different. All the nations will be

assembled and will be held to everlasting account. Indeed, for them to be held accountable it is important for Matthew that the word must be taken to them. Thus we have the commission of Matthew 28:16-20. But, as H. Benedict Green has noted, a distinction must be made between nations and individuals. There is no indication in the New Testament that the nations will retain their ethnic identity at the end of the age. Nowhere do we learn that the Chinese will be admitted while the Australians are left out. That is not going to happen. When it comes to who will enter the kingdom or be consigned to the Valley of Gehinnom it will be individuals. And, for Matthew, that is where the focus of this parable rests; whether one be Jew or Gentile. Matthew is saying that those who will enter into the benefits of the new age are those to whom Jesus' word was taken and who acted with hospitality and compassion toward its messengers. On the other hand, and this is the real shocker, it is not only those in the nations who disregarded the word and who, on various grounds, will not be admitted to the kingdom, but, as Green states, "those among the membership of the church [the other nation of Matt 21:43] who failed to recognize or serve Christ in the persons of their afflicted fellow disciples."

As you did it not to one of the least of these [Matthew's little ones] you did it not to me.

The more I think of it the more this seems to come close to the point of the Parable of the *Wheat and the Tares*. Our task in the family of God is to nourish and encourage our fellow believer on the journey. We are to help that bearer and messenger of the Word who is bereft and discouraged for the stand he or she has taken. This is our solemn responsibility. It sounds sentimental but our hands are the hands of Jesus as we help our sisters and brothers carry the word to a dying world.

### **Arguing the Case**

Now having given you my conclusions, first, let me underscore the major exegetical reasons for this reading. Then I wish to finish with some thoughts on how to preach this.

The parable opens with the description of the scene at the final Judgment. There are echoes in v. 31 of Daniel 7, especially Dan 7:14. In Daniel the Son of Man presides over Adam's restored dominion and dispenses it to the faithful Jewish resisters who refused to bow their knees to the incursions of Hellenism. In Matthew, the Son of Man will vindicate his disciples and will assist in the judging process (Matt 19:28). Before the Son of Man are gathered all the nations in the sense of all peoples. I believe the Greek phraseology *panta ta ethnē* is inclusive of Israel as well as the other peoples. It is even inclusive of the church. For Matthew, the church will be included in the judgment at the last day.

The extended metaphor of the shepherd separating the sheep from the goats in verses 32-33 indicates the authority of the Son of Man now referred to as King. There is no hesitation as to his ability to dispense justice. Like an experienced shepherd the Son of Man knows which one belongs to which group.

Commencing in verse 35, verses 35-40 speak about those who are welcomed into the kingdom. Here the focus is now clearly on the results of the mission to the nations in Matthew 28:16-20. W.D. Davies has drawn attention to an amazing parallel in the Midrash on Ps 118:17 found in the Rabbinic material. It is the last day when the Judge will address the judged.

The judged one is asked:

“What has your work been?” If he then says, “I have fed the hungry,” he is told to “enter on...” If he says, “I have given the thirsty to drink,” then it will be said, “That is the gate of Yahweh: enter in...” If he says, “I have clothed the naked,” then it will be said, “enter in...”

Additional points are made concluding with a word about “the works of love.” I believe this latter reference is important for Matthew because obeying the love commandment is so central for Matthew. When the people of the nations encounter the Christian missionaries of the Messiah who call them to acknowledge the authority of the Son of Man everything depends on their response to them. If individuals respond with hospitality and works of love they will be welcomed into God’s new world. What is astonishing is how far this goes. As we have noted they are even called righteous (25:37). Their expression of surprise is understandable. With their limited knowledge they were stunned to know that in these vulnerable missionaries who didn’t seem to amount to anything was the Son of God and King. Such is nature of our mission.

The reference to the least of these my brethren – of course – has been much discussed. But, analysis of the text makes it pretty clear. It is the vulnerable Christian missionaries; the same ones as noted in Matt 10:42 there doing their work in the Jewish mission. Notice that in 10:42 it is the one in Israel who gives a cup of cold water to a disciple who is blessed. Likewise, in 25:40, those welcomed from the nations are blessed because they did express the works of love by extending hospitality to Jesus’ brothers – the people of God. The criterion for their vindication is not the romantic idea that somehow or other that Jesus is embodied in the poor of the world; and thus by being Bill Gates anonymously are doing the same great works of service commanded by Jesus. No, these who do the works of love that are rewarded are those who extend the love command toward the marginalized and unrecognized disciples of **Jesus** and so attest unconsciously to his lordship. Stunned, in this new context at the last day, suddenly they discover he is not that crucified scoundrel but the Lord and King and Ruler of God’s New World. Talk about a shock!

This brings us to the final section of the unit (verses 41-46). Here we encounter those who are moved to the left hand of the king and are about to be consigned to the Valley of Gehinnom. The salient issue is, “Who are these people?” Our position is that they are not the people in the nations who rejected the word brought by the missionaries. There is no reason why such people should have any expectation of receiving praise for doing works of love from Jesus or anyone associated with him. As many have noted their reprobation is already sealed for other reasons not germane to the framework of this story. Rather, the ones who are the true focus of the word of condemnation are those people of the other nation – the Kingdom of God. They had

heard the call of the Master and obeyed the Gospel; but they had become lax in service. Like the wicked servant (24:51), the foolish virgins (25:11-12) and the slave who buried the entire talent given to him by his master (25:30), the people of the Kingdom had become slothful. They had failed to show assistance and care for their fellow disciples. There was no fruit. Once again the image of the shepherd going out to find the lost sheep as a model for discipleship comes to mind. This is the cautionary word of forewarning to all who will hear this parable:

Truly, I say to you as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me.

Indeed, much ink has been spilt over whether “the least of these” in v. 45 or “my brethren” in v. 40 is exclusive to the Christian community. Exegetes bring up the references to brother in Matt 5:22-26 and the call to love our enemies in 5:43-44 to point to its universal application. As I understand it, Matthew’s position can best be understood in contemplating the word from Paul in Galatians 6:10:

...as we have opportunity, let us do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.

It is primarily a forewarning to the people of God. We are going to be held responsible for shepherding our brothers. No doubt it is an uncomfortable word when it is spoken to a complacent church. There are some who are absolutely convinced that, as the elect, they have an iron-clad claim on the ticket to the messianic banquet. Matthew is a solemn reminder that there will be some disappointed and many surprised looks on that day. As ones who bear the burden of teaching and preaching to the people of God we have a solemn responsibility. Part of it is to keep in mind Matthew 25. We are to remind people of Jesus’ last solemn word of forewarning before the Passion in the first Gospel. Nowhere is this more applicable than as a word to ministers and elders of the church.

### **Conclusion**

The Parable of the Sheep and the Goats, no doubt, will remain in the popular mind, as David Wenham notes, “Jesus’ classic statement of Christian social responsibility.” Nevertheless, interpreters in the church – despite fighting a losing battle – should continue to resist popular misconstruals of the way this parable functions in Matthew. Matthew assumes that the nations are the possession of God. Ps 82:8 says, “For to you [O God] belong all the nations.” Matt 28:16-20 sums up the protocol. The nations are to learn and recognize that the exalted Jesus of Nazareth is lord of all. The response of each individual to that summons will determine her or his eternal destiny. The appropriate reaction is the fulfillment of the love commandment – doing the works of love. Concretely this involves the offering of hospitality and welcoming joyfully the vulnerable messengers of Jesus, both inside the church and in the nations.

Of course, this is a far cry from modern misconstruals of the text. Setting aside such enterprises as doing a certain number of hours helping the needy to get you into an exclusive college, this word usually is heard today as a mandate to assist in some kind of social service project. But this is just another version of seeking salvation by human goodness or works. It has little connection with doing the works of love for the sake of works of love; and is totally disconnected with acknowledging the lordship of Father, Son and Spirit: the word of the missionaries. Similarly, the idea that somehow Jesus is intrinsically embodied in the poor, per se, and to help them is to serve Jesus strays way too far from this text.

Above all, Matthew is giving through this short parabolic vignette on Judgment Day a forewarning to a complacent church. Do not be like old Israel and assume that God owes you one and all will be well for you on the last day. There is work to be done both in taking the word to the nations and encouraging our vulnerable brothers and sisters to remain faithful along the way. This is the common task that still undergirds our work to this day.

Allan J. McNicol  
Sermon Seminar 2012