

Matthew 25:31-46: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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- [0 : 0 0] Matthew chapter 25 verses 31 to 46 Then the righteous will answer him, saying, Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you a drink?
- And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you? And the king will answer them, Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.
- Then he will say to those on his left, Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me no food.
- I was thirsty and you gave me no drink. I was a stranger and you did not welcome me. Naked and you did not clothe me. Sick and in prison and you did not visit me. Then they will answer, saying, Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison and did not minister to you?
- Then he will answer them, saying, Truly I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me. And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.
- [1 : 5 3] Along with the parable of the wheat and the tares and the parable of the dragnet, the parable of the sheep and the goats that ends chapter 25 of Matthew is one of the great separation parables of Jesus' ministry.
- A raid before the exalted and enthroned Son of Man is a great judgment scene. The nations being divided by the king as a shepherd divides the flock between sheep and goats.
- Sheep being sent to the right, the place of blessing, and the goats to the left. Now, while this is commonly described as the parable of the sheep and the goats, that analogy isn't really explored within it.
- It's just an introductory metaphor, perhaps. And what we're focusing upon is more a judgment scene that is less of a parable than a straightforward description, such as we have in Matthew 7 concerning those who say, Lord, Lord, etc.
- Despite being very familiar, this parable does raise a number of questions. Perhaps one of the most obvious ones concerns its relationship with the rest of the material of the Olivet Discourse.
- [2 : 5 5] While it occurs at the very end and the climax of the Olivet Discourse in Matthew, where Jesus is speaking about coming judgment upon Jerusalem and the coming of the Son of Man in judgment in AD 70, it does seem difficult to fit into that limited frame.
- A number of commentators have maintained that there is some sort of temporal hiatus or break located at a point between the earlier part of the discourse and the later. So the former part deals with the events of AD 70 and then the later part with the end of all things.
- Arguments for this have sometimes appealed to the idea of eschatological telescoping. So when you have a telescope, you can pull it out and then you can bring it back in. And there's a way in which future events foretold by prophets can correspond to each other with earlier events anticipating far greater later events.

Now this is something that we see in the prophets concerning, for instance, prophecies of a new covenant. At certain points, those prophecies seem to have an original referent to the return from exile.

And so that's the new covenant. But there's clearly a greater new covenant brought in by Christ. And so there's looking forward beyond that original event foretold by the prophet to something greater that fulfills that even more.

[4 : 14] You can think about the same thing with the way the Exodus plays out. There's an original Exodus event, but that Exodus anticipates a greater Exodus. And at certain points we see some of these prophecies that have elements that do not seem to rest finely upon their initial referent.

They seem to point beyond it to anticipate something even greater. Perhaps such prophecies could be thought of as great clouds of promise from which an initial shower comes, but they do not yet fully discharge themselves of the full weight of the reign of blessing that they have to give that awaits something more.

And here I think we might encounter one such occasion. This parable or this discourse refers to AD 70 and the events immediately after that, but it also looks forward to something greater and I think something that is at the very end of all things.

A second question concerning this concerns the identity of the least of these to whom Jesus refers. And many people are divided between a universalist and a particularist reading of this expression.

So universalist readings find in the least of these a reference to the poor more generally. So Benedict XVI, for instance, wrote that Jesus identifies himself with those in need, with the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and those in prison.

[5 : 32] Love of God and love of neighbour have become one. In the least of the brethren we find Jesus himself and in Jesus we find God. Now this is a reading that has a long history within the church.

A reading that is honoured in part by the fruit that it has borne. It's something that has inspired and encouraged many people to remarkable practices of the works of mercy. And so particularist readings, by contrast, tend to see in the least of Jesus' brethren a reference to the disciples and the emissaries of Christ.

They're the ones that Christ has sent out as his missionaries, as those who bring his name to different places. But this reading seems to undercut the support the passage has traditionally been seen to give to the church's ministry to the poor and particular identification with and concern for the poor.

Now I think the particularist reading is the right one. The reference to Jesus' brethren in the context of Matthew's gospel is most likely to refer to disciples or to people who respond positively to the gospel.

Jesus has already spoken in this book of his identification with the disciples that he sent out. In chapter 10 verses 40 to 42 We should also observe, earlier in that same chapter, in chapter 10 of Matthew, Jesus sends out the twelve in a way that identifies with them and also uses a test of hospitality, the way that the cities and towns of Israel respond to them as a test by which they will be judged in the final judgment.

[7 : 31] And whatever town or village you enter, find out who is worthy in it, and stay there until you depart. As you enter the house, greet it. And if the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it.

But if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. And if anyone will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet when you leave that house or town.

Truly I say to you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town. Whether or not there is a large temporal hiatus, a gap between the events of AD 70 and the events of the end of the world, for instance, the end of Matthew 25 seems to involve a widening of the lens of discourse.

The passages that precede it are focused upon the judgment of Israel and Jerusalem. But here is the judgment of all the nations that is in view. The Son of Man is enthroned.

He's the ruler, not just of Israel, but of the whole world. This is a reordering of the cosmos and of the entire order of the nations, not just of Israel. The identification between Jesus and his emissaries was first spoken of in the context of the disciples' mission among the towns and villages of Israel.

[8 : 46] And this parable seems to envisage the expansion of this into a broader mission among all of the nations of the world. Now that already took place in the events of the Book of Acts.

And I think we have some anticipation of this in the Book of Revelation, where there are seven churches in Gentile cities that correspond, I believe, to the city of Jerusalem, which is the focus of the book.

So there's the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, but there's also judgment upon Gentile cities. So I think we're seeing at least the initial fulfillment of Matthew chapter 25 in AD 70 and the events around that.

There's going to be judgment upon Gentile places along with Israel. Like the towns and the villages of Israel, the nations will be judged by the hospitality or the hostility that they show to the poor brethren of Jesus.

The mission to the nations is in continuity with and is an escalation of the disciples' earlier mission to Israel, and it will lead to a similar judgment. Now, although it's been suggested that the particularist reading of the least of these, the identification of the least of these with the particular disciples of Christ and the missionaries of Christ, challenges the ministry to the poor that the passage has inspired, I don't believe that that need to be the case.

[10 : 03] The key element of this parable that we're in danger of forgetting is that Jesus comes incognito and the sheep entertain him unawares. Think about the example of Abraham who entertains angels unawares.

He's a man of hospitality and that leads him to entertain angels not knowing that they're angels. In the same way, the people who are blessed here are blessed on account of their hospitality, not knowing who it is that they're entertaining.

They don't know that they're entertaining Christ and his disciples. Now, back in Matthew 10, there is a suggestion that there is some recognition that this is a righteous man or a prophet.

So beware of overplaying this identification with the poor, but it is important. One of the things that it does highlight is that Christ comes in a form that we would not expect.

Israel was expecting one to come as a great king, perhaps, and yet they find someone who eats with tax collectors and sinners, one who's a friend of prostitutes and those who are outcasts and hated and despised and marginalised.

[11 : 07] And Christ, in a similar way, tests our posture towards people in general. Only by a greater extension of hospitality can we enjoy Jesus' particular presence.

As Hebrews 13 verse 2 declares, do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers. For by doing that, some have entertained angels without knowing it. And so only by being people of genuine and deep and extensive hospitality can we be the sort of people who would naturally invite and welcome Christ.

The church needs to live with an open door and an open heart, because that's where Christ meets it. It's much safer to conceive often of Christ's presence as something that can be clearly located, maybe in the Eucharist or in the preaching of the gospel or in the body of the church.

But a Jesus who can come to us as the unrecognised stranger, that can come to us as he came to Israel, for instance, as one who breaks some of our taboos, as one who does not socialise with the refined people that we would want to socialise with.

Well, that is a lot more unsettling and threatening, perhaps. How can we welcome such a king? The connection of the test of hospitality with divine judgement is not just found here and in Matthew chapter 10.

[12 : 23] We see the same thing in Genesis with the stark contrast between the unwitting welcome that Abraham extends to the angels and the attempted gang rape of the angels in Sodom. And in Ezekiel chapter 16, verses 40 to 50, God declares that Sodom's condemnation was related to its indifference and cruelty to the poor and the needy.

And that was displayed in their treatment of two unknown visitors. They didn't know that that was the day of their visitation. They didn't know that those visitors were angels. They just treated them as they would have treated other visitors.

And on various occasions throughout the scriptures, we see that the revelation of the presence of Christ or his people is rendered contingent upon the extension of hospitality to the poor and those in need.

It's in the act of mercy of the good Samaritan that a new neighbour relationship was formed, a new brethren. The Samaritan and the man who fell among thieves were separated from those who had excluded themselves from their indifference to the one in need.

And in that parable, the people of God are established through that act of mercy. At Emmaus, it was only through the hospitality extended to the unknown stranger that the presence of Christ was made known and a meal that was just a regular meal became a celebration of the Lord's Supper.

[13 : 41] Something very similar occurs in the parable of the sheep and the goats then. It is as the sheep receive Jesus' poor brethren that they receive Jesus himself unawares. It's through this act of receiving Jesus' poor brethren that they themselves are marked out as the blessed heirs of the Father with them.

And so the precondition of fellowship with the exalted Son of Man is the welcome extended to the Jesus who comes to us in the guise of the needy stranger as the abandoned or attacked or rejected prophet.

And perhaps this suggests that our society's welcome to the exalted Son of Man will be tested and sought and demonstrated first, not in great cathedrals or in the eloquent prayers that people can give in halls of power, but in soup kitchens and prison cells, in shelters and refuges.

And on that day of judgment, it will be the way that we have treated that person in need, that person who's the stranger, that person who's rejected, who came across our path.

And in our posture towards such people, we're being tested in our reception of Christ himself. Christ will go on to be rejected by this people.

[14 : 52] He will be an outcast. He will be a crucified one, one who's marked as a criminal, one who's shamed and publicly humiliated and marked. He identifies with the least.

He's the one who becomes one of the least of his society. And only a people who can reach out and recognise and love those who are the least and rejected and outcast will be able to receive such a Christ.

A question to consider. How can the criteria of judgment suggested in this particular passage change or maybe challenge some of our ideas of what final judgment looks like?