

2013

Matthew 25:31-46 Exegetical Perspective

Paul N. Anderson

George Fox University, panderso@georgefox.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ccs>



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), and the [Christianity Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Anderson, Paul N., "Matthew 25:31-46 Exegetical Perspective" (2013). *Faculty Publications - College of Christian Studies*. 330.
<https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ccs/330>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Christian Studies at Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications - College of Christian Studies by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact arolfe@georgefox.edu.

Exegetical Perspective

The parable of the Sheep and the Goats is one of the most moving, yet most vexing among the teachings of Jesus. Found only in Matthew, this parable concludes its final collection of Jesus' sayings in ways striking and disturbing. Over and against earlier emphases about being prepared for the unannounced coming of Christ, here the Son of Man sits as the heavenly judge of the gathered nations, along with his angels, dividing humanity between the sheep and the goats. The sheep, at his honoring right hand, will receive a heavenly welcome; the goats, at his dishonoring left, will be led away into eternal punishment.

How will such distinctions be made? Will the righteous be rewarded for keeping the Law, attaining outward or inward purity, or being watchful for the coming Son of Man? None of these worthy values will do on the final day of judgment according to this parable; only putting the commandments of Christ into practice—loving God and loving neighbor (22:37-40)—will suffice. On the final Day, the Son of Man shall say:

Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed 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 . . . Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me. (Matt. 25:34-36, 40)

By the same token, failing to do such things to "the least" of brothers and sisters (adelphoi) is to fail to do so also to Christ. While some interpreters have seen "the least of these" siblings of Jesus as referring only to believers, limiting them to the Christian fold misses the point entirely. It includes all persons, regardless of their religious or social status, as God's children and siblings of the Son.

At work here is a multileveled approach to Christ-centered living. On the first level, Jesus' followers are to obey his dual commandments to love God and neighbor, thereby summing up the heart of the Law. Whereas Luke's Jesus connects unlikely Samaritans with one's "neighbor" when focusing on the commandment to love the other (Luke 10:25-37), Matthew's Jesus includes the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, and the imprisoned among the ones his followers are called to love.

On a second level, disciples are called to imitate the vision of Jesus, who dined with "sinners;" thereby extending divine forgiveness even before they repented (9:9-13). Seeing others as God sees them embraces the neglected, inviting them into redemptive relationship and the fellowship of grace.

On a third level, Jesus' followers are to perceive "the other" as though he or she were Christ himself. As Fritz Eichenberg portrayed in his wood-block print *The Christ of the Breadlines*, the serving of the needy should be approached as serving Christ himself. How can genuine followers of Jesus neglect the prisoner, the hungry, the thirsty, or the naked if they see in these

the very image of Christ? Christ-centered living thus transforms disciples' actions, their sight, and their perspectives; and anticipating the Lord's return brings such a vision for living into sharper focus.

Perplexing problems with this parable, however, abound. First, if salvation is a factor of receiving grace through faith, does Jesus here declare salvation to be dependent on one's works? Such an inference is hard to avoid; the Johannine Jesus also declares the Son of Man to award resurrections to life and condemnation according to persons' merits (John 5:25-29). One could argue, of course, that the fruit of authentic faith is one's loving works, and that authentic believers-if they really see others as children of God-would of course respond lovingly.

This leads to a second problem: why do believers fail to see the face of Christ in the faces of the needy? Indeed, the most earnest of endeavors may also blind the most ardent of believers, unless they retain an awareness of the overall mission: extending God's love to those who need it most.

A third problem involves how not only to deal with poverty and hardship as symptoms of social ills, but how also to address their causes. In long-range terms, Christ's calling us to care for the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, and the imprisoned calls for believers also to address generational factors of poverty. Just as Jesus calls his followers to break spirals of violence by the transforming love of enemies, he calls them also to break cycles of poverty, beginning with glimpsing the face of Christ in the countenance of the other.

For members of Matthew's audience, called to hope for the Lord's return and also to be ready for its advent, the parable of the Sheep and the Goats poses a fitting climax to the final instructions of the Lord. Here Jesus reminds believers of what it means to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world (5:13- 14). Just as one's light should not be hidden under a bushel, one's talent should not be buried in the ground. To have one's lamp filled and lit, to multiply the entrusted resources of the master, to be numbered among the sheep rather than the goats, finally involve continuing Jesus' work by extending his love to the forgotten corners of the world.

In the last verse of Matthew's final parable (v. 46), Jesus thus redefines righteousness for his followers in all ages. Righteousness abides neither in performing rites of purification nor in heeding legal mandates; it involves embracing the way of the kingdom, which imbues the world with divine Jove and extends healing grace to all. In that sense, it defines living faith as faithful living, and it invites believers to put into action the Prayer of the Lord: that God's kingdom would come and that his will would be done on earth as it is in heaven (6:10).

PAUL N. ANDERSON