

On Separating Sheep From Goats

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Whenever a case for the social gospel is presented, Matthew 25:31-46 is likely to be at the forefront of the argument. Here, of course, is the picture of the Last Judgment. The Son of Man, sitting on his glorious throne, will gather the nations and separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He puts the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.

The King then pronounces judgment upon the sheep in these terms: "For I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me." The righteous ask him when they did all this, and the King answers, "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me." Then he passes the opposite judgment upon those who did not do these things. "As you did it not to one of the least of these," he says, "you did it not to me."

The modern argument for the social gospel goes something like this. In this passage we have a picture of the basis on which we are going to be judged. Certainly, then, feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, and visiting the sick and prisoners are of primary importance in the life of the Christian and in the mission of the Church. The attitude of the Christian to Christ is--in this view--determined by how he carries out these acts of humanitarian service.

Surprisingly, even evangelicals rarely challenge this interpretation. If this interpretation of the judgment one is correct, the conclusion liberals often draw from it is justified. If the primary basis for judgment of a man as he stands before the King is to be how much he involved himself in ministering to the social and bodily needs of people, then both the Church and individual Christians ought to expend their greatest energy in pursuing those ends.

However, there are a few problems with this interpretation. One is that it flatly contradicts the teachings the rest of the New Testament that salvation comes by faith in the atoning work of Jesus Christ on the cross. If this passage means we are to be judged on the basis our service to our fellow man, then the entire exposing of the Epistles (with the possible exception of James) and many indications in the Gospels are erroneous.

Resolution of this issue, the basis of salvation, determines not only the message of the Church but its mission. If we are saved by grace through faith alone, as the apostles say and as the Reformers reaffirmed, then that is our message, and our mission is to communicate that message. However, if our right standing with God depends on our humanitarian efforts, our message is something else entirely, and our mission is encompassed in the attempt to alleviate social ills.

Let us be more careful in our exegesis of this passage. First, to whom is the Son of Man speaking? "Before him will be gathered all the nations ..." (v. 32). The Son of Man here addresses *ta ethnē*. In the singular this means a nation or a people, but in the plural the term is used of nations distinct from Israel. It refers, therefore, to the Gentile nations, the so-called heathen. The nations here gathered are those nations of the Gentiles that, at the time of our Lord's speaking, have not yet been reached with the Gospel of his Kingdom. He is not speaking of them as if they were his followers. He is setting forth the destiny of those nations that lay beyond Israel and the mission he had been carrying to them.

The second thing to note is that, fundamentally, the judgment is not rendered simply on the basis of

service performed to the people of the world; it is based on the attitude the nations have toward Christ himself. The reason why some are approved and others are rejected is that the former had received Christ in their actions and the latter had rejected Christ in their lack of action. "Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee, or thirsty and give thee drink?" (v. 37). The primary importance of the ministries performed lies in the reason for their performance and the One to whom the service is rendered. The ministries indicate a positive attitude toward the Son of Man.

The third point is that the service is performed to "one of the least of these my brethren." Who are these "brethren"? Although the word is not included in the negative statement in verse 45, it is clearly implied there in the phrase "the least of these." If the nations are to be judged in their attitude toward the Son of Man on the grounds of how they treated the "least of these my brethren," we must find out who these brethren are.

Social-gospel advocates treat "brethren" as a general term referring to any or all persons. But did Jesus really regard all persons as his brethren? His use of the term in other contexts shows he did not. In Matthew 23:8 Jesus says. "But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher and you are all brethren." Who is this teacher? Obviously, our Lord is referring to himself. The brethren here are those who have him for their teacher. His usage indicates that he means his disciples.

In Matthew 12:46-50, paralleled by Mark 3:31-35, Jesus speaks of "brothers" in a similar way: "While he was still speaking to the people, behold, his mother and his brothers stood outside, asking to speak to him. But he replied to the man who told him, 'Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?' And stretching out his hand toward 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.'" In the parallel passage in Luke 8:21 he puts it slightly differently: "But he' said to them,'My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.'" In these statements Jesus explicitly defines the term "brethren." His brethren are those who have been called into his kingdom as his disciples.

Christ is consistent in this usage, as seen in Matthew 28:10: "Then Jesus said to them,'Do not be afraid: go and tell my brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see me.'" The context insists that we interpret "my brethren" as his disciples. The same usage appears in John 20:17, 18: "Jesus said to her,'Do not hold me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brethren and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" He was speaking to Mary Magdalene, and the proof that he was referring to his disciples is contained in verse 18: "Mary Magdalene went and said to the disciples,'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said these things to her."

Other passages also indicate that our Lord does not identify himself with men in general in this intimate manner but identifies specifically with those whom he is sending forth in his name. "He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives him who sent me" (Matt. 10:40; John 13:20). The same truth is implied in the encounter of the risen Christ with Saul on the road to Damascus. "Saul. Saul, why do you persecute me?" (Acts 9:40). Jesus here identifies himself with his Church, which Saul was persecuting, for Saul had never directly persecuted Jesus himself. There are therefore no grounds for saying that the intimate identification implied in the term "my brethren" applies to all men in general.

What, then, is the Son of Man on his judgment seat saying in Matthew's picture of the Last Judgment? He is saying that the Gentile nations, to whom he sent forth his disciples, are to be judged on the basis

of how they received those whom he sent. If they received his messengers with open arms and tender solicitude, it is the same as if they had received Jesus himself that way. implied also is a favorable response to the message his apostles had brought to them, for the message and messengers are inseparable. Certainly such a response would have been shown by their care for the physical needs of the apostles. who often were beaten, imprisoned, and starved in the course of their mission.

Those who use this passage as evidence that the primary criterion on which we are judged is our humanitarian concern are guilty of faulty exegesis. We are to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit those who are sick and in prison, in the name of Christ. Acts of compassion will overflow from the life that is rooted in Christ by faith. But the primary mission of the Church is to carry the message of Jesus Christ to the world so that men may respond in repentance and faith and so be saved.

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