

## Discipleship in the Lectionary – 11/26/2023



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Revised Common Lectionary Year A

Sunday, November 26<sup>th</sup>

**Matthew 25:31-46**

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### Christ is with us!

This is the final Gospel lection of the liturgical year, and it falls on Christ the King or Reign of Christ Sunday. The text presents the final parable or prediction in a series of teaching on the end times and the Second Coming. The theme of judgment that runs through chapters 24 and 25 reaches its final climax. This story is also the closing text of the fifth and final discourse of Jesus recorded by Matthew before the events leading up to the Last Supper and Jesus' and Jesus' passion. It is thus the last formal teaching of Jesus before His death and resurrection. The final lesson of any great teacher is something we pay particular attention to. How much more should this be the case if the teacher is none other than the Son of God? Some commentators view the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats more as a straightforward apocalyptic prediction rather than a parable. Regardless of its literary genre, it is a powerful passage. Many treat this as a standalone text and view it as the ethics of the faithful and how they will be judged. It is thus interpreted as a command to help the poor in general. Others view this text in its broader context within Matthew as a whole and find a somewhat different meaning. Who are "the little ones?" Who are "the nations?" Who are "the sheep" and who are "the goats?" As Christ's disciples, how do we interpret and apply this parable in our lives?

### Matthew 25:31-46 Commentary

As a reminder, Jesus is addressing His teaching to His disciples (24:3). Chapters 24 and 25 are often referred to as the Olivet Discourse because it occurred on the Mount of Olives (24:3).

<sup>31</sup> *"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne.*

Jesus frequently refers to Himself as the Son of Man in Matthew 8:20; 9:6; 10:23; 11:9; 12:8, 32, 40; 13:37, 41; 16:13, 27-28; 17:9, 12, 22; 19:18; 20:18; 24:27, 30, 37, 39, 44; 25:31; 26:2, 24, 45, 64). This title and imagery are found in Daniel 7:13-14. Unlike the first coming of Jesus where he emptied Himself and took the form a servant, His second coming will involve a demonstration of His power and glory (Philippians 2:5-11).

<sup>32</sup> *Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.* <sup>33</sup> *And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left.*

Shepherd is often used as a metaphor for God and Jesus and sheep as a metaphor for people of God. A familiar image to the original audience was seeing shepherds separate their sheep from the goats. While a shepherd may lead a mixed flock, He would separate them once they arrived at a new pasture since they did not graze well together. “The nations” (*ethnos* – the origin of the English words ethnic and ethnicity) commonly refers to nations, people, and Gentiles. Therefore, at the final judgment, all people will be gathered, and they will be separated into two distinct groups such as a shepherd will separate sheep from the goats.

*<sup>34</sup> Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. <sup>35</sup> 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, <sup>36</sup> I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’ <sup>37</sup> Then the righteous will answer him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? <sup>38</sup> And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? <sup>39</sup> And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ <sup>40</sup> 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.’*

Those on the king’s right (traditionally God’s right hand is associated with a place of salvation, refuge, and protection) will be blessed. The reasons given are because they extended mercies to “the least of these my brothers” who were in need. Jesus equates extending mercies to the least of His brothers as the equivalent to extending such mercies to Him also. The six basic needs addressed here (food, drink, hospitality, clothing, healthcare, and visitation) are more illustrative than exhaustive.

*<sup>41</sup> “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. <sup>42</sup> For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, <sup>43</sup> 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.’ <sup>44</sup> Then they also 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?’ <sup>45</sup> 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.’ <sup>46</sup> And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”*

Those placed on the king’s left were done so because they failed to demonstrate compassion and mercy to the “least of these” and this was the equivalent withholding such from Jesus Himself. The consequences for both groups are spelled out – those on the right will experience eternal life while those on the left will face eternal punishment.

### Reflection and Application

Who is Jesus referring to with the expression, “the least of these my brothers?” The popular interpretation is “the least of these” applies to the poor in general and thus Jesus is present with the poor. Whatever we do to the poor, we do to Jesus. Those that point to a different interpretation argue that Jesus is unmistakably clear about who He considers His brothers and sisters to be: “For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother” (12:50). Jesus’ brothers are thus His disciples. In worldly terms, Jesus’ disciples are among the least. Jesus already explained to His disciples the dangers they will encounter and how they will be sent out as “sheep in the midst of wolves” (10:16f). This text notes how everyone will be judged based on how they respond to Jesus’ disciples.

This text would have been very comforting to the original audience of Matthew’s Gospel. They were already experiencing persecution. This lectionary text promises them that Jesus is with them. What enemies do to them from all the nations, they do to Jesus. Despite their low worldly status, one day Jesus will return in power and

glory and separate those who showed mercy to the disciples and those who did not. Both will be judged accordingly.

If the interpretation of the text assumes Jesus' disciples are those being divided into sheep and goats, does this not suggest salvation has a works-based component to it – that one must do things to the poor to be saved? On the other hand, the interpretation that assumes it is the non-believers of the world that are being divided up based on how they treat Jesus' disciples, it suggests non-believers may also be found righteous by how they respond to Christ's disciples. It must be remembered that this is not the only text that addresses the criteria for final judgment and not the only text that identifies the responsibilities that disciples have towards the poor.

It is perhaps ironic that the popular interpretation of this text today assumes members of the Church are more likely to be in a position of privilege and must be reminded of their need to take care of the poor. For Christ's disciples in the first century, it was the very opposite. It was Christ's disciples who were likely to be hungry and thirsty, homeless, estranged, naked, afflicted, or in prison. The stark reminder for us today is that being a disciple risks going against the world and is a way of life that risks persecution in some form or another. This is the way it is for many in the Church today in different parts of the world and the way it has been for much of the Church across the ages. It will most likely be this way for disciples in the West in the near future. Regardless of the worldly difficulties we may face, this text reminds us that Christ is with us and Christ will return and reign over us as the Kingdom is consummated.



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