

The Sheep and the Goats

Mt 25:31-46

BACKGROUND

- It's a stretch to call this a parable, since it's a direct description of events to come with very little figurative language. (But I'll call it one anyway.)
- This parable was spoken three days before the passion.
- "Those gathered encompass *panta ta ethne* ["all the nations", v. 32], which can be translated either all the Gentiles or all the nations. The latter translation is better suited to express the all-inclusive character of the judgment in view."¹
- "Blessing (Gen 12:3), inheritance (Mt 5:5; 19:29; 21:38), and kingdom relate to the promised land concept of the exodus, and had become components of Israel's eschatological hope by the time of Jesus (in Paul, cf. 1 Cor 6:9-10; Gal 3:14; 5:21; Eph 1:3, 14)."²

QUESTIONS

1. While the popular interpretation is that "the least of these brothers of mine" refers to the needy in general, the majority interpretation historically and among modern scholars is that they are the needy of the disciples in particular.³ Here is the evidence:⁴
 - a. When Jesus uses the phrase "little ones" in Matthew he's *always* referring to the disciples (10:42; 18:6, 10, 14).
 - b. In Matthew when Jesus speaks of his family members or brothers he's *always* describing the disciples of Jesus who do God's will (12:46-50; 23:8-9; 28:10).
 - c. The parallel in 10:40-42: "He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives the one who sent me. Anyone who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and anyone who receives a righteous man because he is a righteous man will receive a righteous man's reward. And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward."
 - d. "It is with his disciples that Jesus promises to be present in the world until the end of the age (28:20; cf. 18:20)."

Who do you think "the least of these brothers of mine" refers to? (See also 2 Cor 5:18-20.)

2. There are various Jewish writings which parallel parts of this parable. For instance, "In a Jewish midrash on Deut 15:9, God tells the people of Israel, 'My children, when you have given food to the poor, I account it

¹ Richard B. Gardner, *Matthew* (Waterloo, Ontario: Herald, 1991), p. 357.

² Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), p. 606.

³ "That the 'siblings' are here 'disciples' is the majority view in church history and among contemporary New Testament scholars, although those who hold 'siblings' to be disciples divide sharply over whether they are specifically missionaries or poor fellow disciples in general. This interpretation fits the function of analogous eschatological discourses (1 Enoch 62; 103-4; 4 Ezra passim; 2 Bar 72), which often encourage repressed minorities that God will judge the world on the basis of how it treated them..." [Keener, p. 606.] Among those supporting the majority view: Gary DeLashmutt, Don Carson (*Expositor's Bible Commentary*), John Chrysostom, John Calvin, Michael Green, and the authors of *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*; contra: *New Jerome Commentary*, Ron Sider (*Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*).

⁴ Gardner, p. 359.

as though you had given food to me' (cf. also Prov. 19:17; Heb 13:2-3)."⁵ In the Dead Sea Scrolls we read, "For all who attack me [the Teacher of Righteousness] You will condemn to judgment, so that in me You might divide between the righteous and the ungodly" (1 QH 15:12). Or 1 Enoch 62:11, "And he will deliver them to the angels for punishment, to execute vengeance on them because they have oppressed his children and his elect." Another parallel is in Ezek 34:

As for you, my flock, this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I will judge between one sheep and another, and between rams and goats... 20 Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says to them: See, I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. 21 Because you shove with flank and shoulder, butting all the weak sheep with your horns until you have driven them away, 22 I will save my flock, and they will no longer be plundered. I will judge between one sheep and another. 23 I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd. 24 I the LORD will be their God, and my servant David will be prince among them. I the LORD have spoken.

A striking parallel is found in the non-canonical book 2 Baruch, chapter 72:

1 Hear now also regarding the bright lightning which is to come at the consummation after these 2 black (waters): this is the word. After the signs have come, of which you were told before, when the nations become turbulent, and the time of My Messiah is come, he shall both summon all the 3 nations, and some of them he shall spare, and some of them he shall slay. These things therefore 4 shall come upon the nations which are to be spared by Him. Every nation, which knows not Israel 5 and has not trodden down the seed of Jacob, shall indeed be spared. And this because some out of 6 every nation shall be subjected to thy people. But all those who have ruled over you, or have known you, shall be given up to the sword.

2 Baruch was probably written somewhere in 100-132. (It is quoted in the Epistle of Barnabas 11:9, which is dated from 117-132.) It deals with theodicy, and struggles to understand the second Temple destruction and the fall of Jerusalem. According to Helyer, an expert on early Jewish writing: "Numerous and striking parallels with the NT appear. Literary dependence one way or the other is not likely. The best explanation is shared religious and cultural traditions."⁶ As such, this gives us a window into ideas, images and beliefs which may have been in existence during Jesus' ministry.

What is new in Jesus' parable?

3. Both the sheep and the goats express surprise. Regarding this, D. A. Carson writes:

...Both the sheep and the goats (25:37, 41, 44) are surprised when Jesus pronounces his verdict in terms of the way they have treated "the least of these brothers of mine." If what Jesus is referring to was compassion of a generic sort, it is hard to see how anyone would be all that surprised. The point is that it is Jesus' *identification* with these people who have (or have not) been helped that is critical—and that is a constant feature of biblical religion. For example, when Saul (Paul) persecutes Christians, he is persecuting *Jesus* (Acts 9:4). Real followers of Jesus will go out of their way to help other followers of Jesus, not least the weakest and most despised of them; others will have no special inclination along these lines. That is what separates sheep and goats (25:32-33).⁷

Why are the two groups surprised?

⁵ Gardner. 359.

⁶ Larry Helyer, *Exploring Jewish Literature of the Second Temple Period* (Downer's Grove: IVP, 2002), p. 426.

⁷ D. A. Carson, *For the Love of God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1998), entry for January 25.

4. If one accepts the interpretation that the “least of these brothers of mine” are disciples, this has implications for the rest of the Church:

If we stay with [this] interpretation..., we will be inclined to say that the church is Jesus’ needy brothers and sisters. Like the early disciples, afflicted and in need as we serve as Jesus’ emissaries, we may claim the identity of *the least of these*. Such was the claim of Brethren and Mennonites in 1775 when they presented a joint petition to the Pennsylvania General Assembly regarding their peace stance., and there are occasions today when the designation still fits. One thinks of volunteers who live and work with the poor of Latin America to protest injustice and to build communities of hope.

More often than not, however, the church as we know it in Western culture more nearly resembles *the nations* to whom Jesus’ messengers are sent. We are settled communities who must decide how we will receive Jesus. From that vantage point, the all-important question to ask ourselves is this: Have we welcomed the radical witness of those disciples who in Jesus’ name challenge our usual preoccupations? When worldly powers afflict them, have we stood alongside them in love and solidarity and active care for the needy?⁸

Do you agree? If so, how do you relate to “the least of these?” [Keener adds, “Unless disciples ‘receive’ on another in God’s household, they reject Christ whose representatives their fellow disciples are (18:5-6; 28-29).”]

5. Michael Green sees a secondary lesson here about the fate of “the nations” with limited exposure to the gospel:

[This parable] tells me that people who have never heard the good news (and it is they, the pagans, *ta ethne*, who are primarily in view here) will be judged by their response to what light they had, and in particular by their response to the brothers (and sisters) of Jesus, whether these be Jewish or Christian.⁹

Is Green stretching the passage with this interpretation, or is he right? What is the interplay between responding to the gospel and responding to the Church? Do you think Jesus, who promised us suffering, meant to draw a distinction between the least of his siblings and the rest?

6. Gary DeLashmutt points out:

What does this passage have for us who are followers of Jesus? God gave us the ministry of reconciliation. God has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are Christ’s ambassadors (2 Corinthians 5:19-20). What an amazing expression of God’s grace—that he would not only give us the free gift of salvation even though we deserve his judgment, but that he then gives us (with all of our sins and problems) the privilege of communicating for him to others. With this privilege comes a sober responsibility—we need to open our mouths and tell people about God’s offer.

“Discuss.”¹⁰



Fun fact: Dispensationalist interpretations see this as a separate judgment of those on earth when Jesus returns to inaugurate the millennia kingdom. The nations in this reading are commonly judged by their treatment of *Israel*. (See Keener, and various articles in *Bibliotheca Sacra* by Eugene Pond.)

⁸ Gardner, p. 362-363.

⁹ Michael Green, *The Message of Matthew* (Downer’s Grove: IVP, 2000), p. 263.

¹⁰ Emily Smith.