

## THE LEAST OF US

One of the best-kept secrets of New Testament exegesis concerns the interpretation of the parable of the Sheep and the Goats, found in Mt 25:31-46. Here Jesus says “the nations”—everybody—will be gathered before him and he will separate them based on their treatment of “the least of these brothers” of his (v. 40). Jesus’ dramatic and poignant identification with “the least” has stirred countless hearts for social justice. As the *New Jerome Commentary* puts it, “This much-loved text presents a practical religion of deeds of loving-kindness.”

So far so good? The problem is, commentators throughout history have recognized that the “least of these brothers” refers not to the needy in general, but to the needy of the disciples in particular [1]. The evidence for this is very strong: When Jesus speaks of his family, as he does here, he’s *always* referring to his disciples, those who do God’s will (Mt 12:46-50; 23:8-9; 28:10). Commentators also point out that “the least of these” in Mt 25:40, 45 is similar to “little ones” in Mt 10:42; 18:6; 10, 14, where he’s also referring to his disciples. Finally, there is a parallel in Mt 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.

This interpretation is the one chosen historically by no less than John Calvin and John Chrysostom, and more recently by evangelical academic authorities Don Carson, Michael Green, Craig Keener and others [2]. In fact, the only sources I ran across who support the more familiar interpretation, that Jesus is referring to the needy in general, were *Jerome* and Ron Sider, in his *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*. The more familiar interpretation you have probably heard in sermons; the other you’ll find in a good commentary—perhaps because it’s an interpretation more easily explored in a Bible study or lecture.

If you think about this even a little, you'll find it unsettling. After all, this flies in the face of Scripture, from the prophets to the Good Samaritan and elsewhere: to reach out to *all* the needy. We are trained as Christians not to show partiality, and to see all men and women as our brothers and sisters. How strange that Jesus would judge not on the basis of our treatment of all of these, but on our treatment of the least of the disciples. Does Jesus not care about the needy if they are, say, Muslims or atheists?

To come to terms with this, we need to put ourselves in the shoes of his disciples. This comes at the end of Jesus' "Olivet discourse" in Matthew, delivered to his disciples from the Mount of Olives, overlooking Jerusalem. This discourse (Mt 24-25 and parallels) is filled with warnings about the importance of being ready for the Day of the Lord. Jesus has made his return trip to Jerusalem, and these are among his last words to those who have followed him nearly to the end of his earthly ministry. They don't know it, but soon they shall be scattered following Jesus' arrest and execution. And not long thereafter they will be sent out into the world empowered by the Holy Spirit to carry Jesus' good news to the nations. These same humble brothers and sisters will be his ambassadors to the world.

When Jesus says that his disciples—those who remain true to him and pour out their lives in his service—are a litmus test for judgment, he is saying that they don't just *carry* his Gospel. In first-century Rome, a world which knows nothing about the Gospel, Jesus' brothers and sisters *are* the Gospel. How natural that those who respond to Jesus would help the poor and vulnerable community of faith. To become a Christian wasn't just to intellectually assent to a proposition. It wasn't merely to embark on a personal spiritual journey. It was to embrace the community of faith, the only one in the world which carried this message of hope and freedom. Who are those clothing, feeding, visiting and caring for the needy of the Church? Surely those are the same ones who have heard and accepted the Gospel.

Jesus knows the travails which await his brothers and sisters, and identifies with them in the deepest way possible. Imagine sending your own sister into a world which will hate and reject her. What gratitude you would feel for those who offer protection and support! In the same way, Jesus' heart is with all of those in the Church who are needy, and his gratitude is for all who care for them in their time of need. Of course we are to show God's love to all men, whether they have accepted the Gospel or not—this is deeply embedded in our Gospel. But as Calvin says of

this passage, “though there is a common tie that binds all the children of Adam, there is a still more sacred union among the children of God.”

Jesus cares very much how you are received when you step out in faith and make yourself vulnerable for the sake of the kingdom. He will not forget how you are treated, especially when you are one of the least of his brothers or sisters. Similarly, let Jesus’ compassion and concern move you to special concern for those who are giving their lives for him, yet are needy—even thirsty, naked, hungry or in prison. (For me, this passage brings to mind Rawn and Bernard Uguoke, friends and missionaries who spoke at RCRC two years ago and who are still searching for the support they need to minister in Ghana.) As it says in Gal 6:10, “So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.”

~Tim Collins

[1] Commentators vary on whether this phrase refers to the needy among the Church, the emissaries of the Church, or the Church in general, but key interpreters agree that it refers to the Church, and not to the needy of the world in general.

[2] Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999); Don Carson, *Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Vol. 8* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984); Michael Green, *The Message of Matthew* (Downer’s Grove: IVP, 2000). See also Richard Gardner, *Matthew* (Waterloo, Ontario: Herald, 1991); D. A. Carson, *For the Love of God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1998).