

Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – November 26, 2017

[Matthew 25:31-46](#)

(Click on scripture above to link directly to the passage on biblegateway.com.)

Suggested Study / Prep

1. Read the passage in several different translations and/or paraphrases
2. Read the provided commentaries below
3. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)
4. Reflect on the provided questions
5. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”

Commentary on Matthew 25:31-46 (From *Homiletics*; “The Victim’s Name Is Jesus” – Nov. 26, 2017)

Whatever one says about Matthew 25:31-46, one thing is certain: this passage is disturbing. Beginning with verse 31, reward and punishment dominate the scene. Instead of reading about mercy, people face retributive judgment for deeds done in their former lives. To press the point, it appears that salvation is by human effort, specifically by acts of kindness shown to others and not by grace.

Although this pericope is typically attributed to Jesus, it's possible it is Matthew's summary for this portion of his gospel. Arguably, this discourse begins in chapter 23 with Jesus' reprimand of the scribes, Pharisees and hypocrites; it continues on into chapter 24 with descriptions of the fall of Jerusalem and the coming of the Son of Man, and concludes with Jesus' tri-parabolic response to the question: "Who then is the faithful and wise slave?" (24:45–25:30).

In light of Jesus' earthly judgment on the religious leaders, Jerusalem and his servants, it is fitting for the Son of Man to come with glory, with his angels and sitting on a throne, poised and ready to render final judgment on "All the nations ... gathered before him" (vv. 31-32; cf. 13:36-43; 16:24-28; 19:16-30, esp. vv. 27-29). Having been ordained by God to judge the world, the Son of Man "will separate people [αυτουζ; i.e., 'them'] one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats" with the sheep at his right hand and the goats at his left hand (vv. 32-33); note that while sheep are routinely mentioned in Matthew and often refer to the people of Israel (e.g., Matthew 9:36; 10:6, 16; 15:24; 18:12; 26:31), goats are not. In fact, since this is the only time "goats" appear in Matthew, the animal imagery probably shouldn't be pressed too far as a way to explain divergent human behavior.

Instead of focusing on sheep and goats, perhaps the stress ought to be on what the king says "to those at his right hand: 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world'" (v. 34); and on what the king says "to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels'" (v. 41). Whereas those on his right showed mercy and compassion when they fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, welcomed strangers, clothed the naked and visited the sick and prisoners (vv. 35-36), those on his left did not (vv. 42-43). The former group acted righteously not out of any sanctimonious motivation prompted by the hope of heaven, but because they saw someone in need (vv. 37-39). The latter group, however, neglected others (v. 44). Simply put, they would have cared for Jesus, but not for anyone else.

But the king's response makes it clear who did right and honored God: "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family [*ἐνι τούτων των ἀσελφών μου των ελαχιστων*], you did it to me" (v. 40). The king's answer resonates with Jesus' previous teaching on this matter: "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me ... and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple -- truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward" (10:40-42; cf. 18:1-5, 19:13-15). It's possible the person in need -- i.e., "one of the least of these" -- is a disciple, and the nations will be judged by the way they treat disciples.

In sharp contrast, those at the king's left hand "will go away into eternal punishment." This group chose not to render aid because as they went through life, they never saw Jesus in need. If they had only seen him, no doubt their conduct would have been exemplary -- as they would have undoubtedly claimed. However, the king rejects their disingenuous reply and says to them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me" (v. 45).

This passage about final judgment has rightly demanded our attention for centuries. U2's Bono referenced it several years ago in a conversation with Bill Hybels. This was an attempt to motivate complacent Christians to demonstrate more compassion for the poor of the world and to promote greater participation in social justice issues, which might just be the parable's main purpose. Accordingly, rather than interpreting the heavenly images literally, perhaps Matthew is utilizing the parable to instruct his community about the "nations" or "people" [*ἔθνη*, i.e., Gentiles, non-Jews, pagans, heathens, nonbelievers] who live in ways consistent with the core teaching of the law. When someone acts on behalf of the needy, Matthew's point is this: *Whatever good he or she does, it will not be forgotten even if it's only giving a cup of cold water in the name of a disciple.*

The preceding conclusion is bolstered by the account of the lawyer who asked, "Teacher, what commandment in the law is greatest?" A paraphrase of Jesus' reply is to love God and love your neighbor (22:34-40). Whoever sees another person hungry, thirsty, lonely, naked, sick or in prison, and offers aid, that one will hear the Son of Man declare, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. ... 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" (vv. 34, 40). But whoever is hardhearted and does not aid those in need will hear the Son of Man say, "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. ... Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me" (vv. 41, 45).

At the beginning of this commentary, the assertion was made that mercy could not be found in this parable. In reality, this parable is infused with mercy from first to last. The needy receive mercy, and those who extend mercy are blessed by the Father above and inherit an eternal kingdom. "Let anyone with ears listen!" and recall Jesus' words: "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy" (5:7; cf. 5:3, 10; 18:23-35).

Additional Resources

- ["The Text this Week"](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for this week...not all will relate to the Matthew passage we are studying, but many will. You will have to sift!
- Check out the commentaries and additional resources available for this Sunday (and others!) at WorkingPreacher.org.

Reflection Questions on Matthew 25:31-46:

- 1.** Do you believe this text is meant to be taken literally or figuratively? Does it describe a scene from the coming “final judgment”? Or is it better understood as a teaching story meant to emphasize the priority of helping those in need? Does it really matter which way we take it?
- 2.** Does this scripture disturb you or comfort you? Or something different? Why?
- 3.** What does this passage have to say in the ancient debate of salvation by faith or works? Is this a possible dividing line between the “sheep” and the “goats”?
- 4.** This passage falls in the Revised Common Lectionary on “Christ the King” Sunday, and it portrays the “Son of Man” as powerful king and judge. How does this image of Jesus/Christ resonate with other scriptural or popular images of Jesus? Is it one of many “faces” of Jesus? An ultimate image of Jesus “in all his glory”? How do we hold this image alongside the image of Jesus as the “Good Shepherd” who will leave the majority of the flock to pursue even a single one that got away?
- 5.** Is this ultimately a story about judgment or justice? How much does our position and context influence our reading of this passage? I.e. – do we hear and understand it differently when we are sick or in prison or needy than when we come from a position of power and privilege?

What questions do you have?

What do you “wonder” about when reading these passages?