Matthew 25:31-46

31 "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit upon his glorious
throne, 32 and all the nations will be assembled before him. And he will separate them one from
another, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. 33 He will place the sheep on his right and
the goats on his left. 34 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. 35 For I was hungry and
you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, 36 naked and
you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me.' 37 Then the righteous will
answer him and say, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? 38
When did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? 39 When did we see you ill
or in prison, and visit you?' 40 And the king will say to them in reply, 'Amen, I say to you, whatever you
did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.' 41 Then he will say to those on his left,
'Depart from me, you accursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. 42 For I was
hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, 43 a stranger and you gave
me no welcome, naked and you gave me no clothing, ill and in prison, and you did not care for me.' 44
Then they will answer and say, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or
ill or in prison, and not minister to your needs?' 45 He will answer them, 'Amen, I say to you, what you
did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me.' 46 And these will go off to eternal
punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."

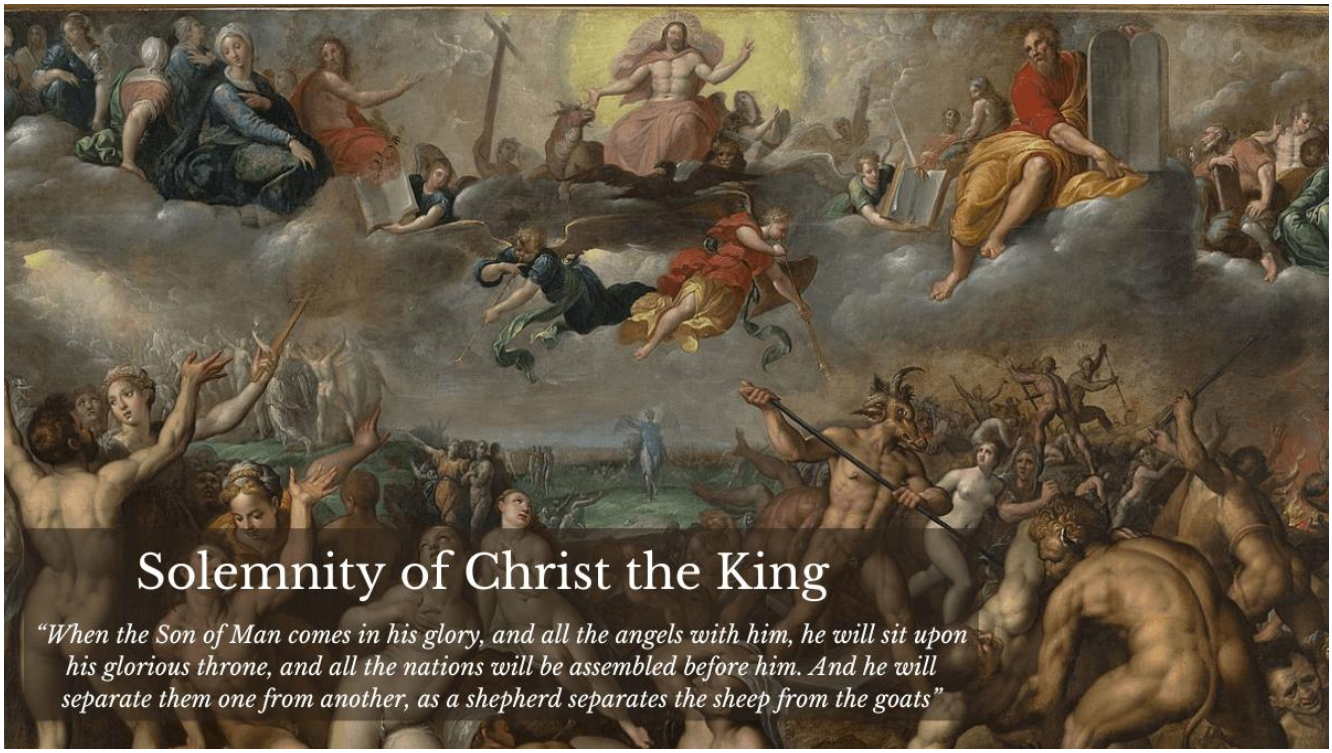

Image credit: Jacob Adriaensz Backer: Last Judgment (Matthew 25:31-33), National Museum in Warsaw, PD-US

Context

The gospel readings for the 29th through 31st Sundays in Lectionary Cycle A all describe a series of confrontations between Jesus and religious authorities of Jerusalem, namely the scribes and Pharisees (Matthew 22 and 23). While not a part of Ordinary Time readings, Chapter 24 continues this theme of imminent destruction and coming tribulation (Mt 24:1-28). It is at this point that we turn the page to

Matthew 25. It is here in Matthew 25 that we will finish the final three Sundays of this cycle of Ordinary Time:

- 32nd Sunday: The Wise and Foolish Maidens (vv. 1-13)
- 33rd Sunday: The Parable of the Talents (vv. 14-30)
- Christ the King: **The Great Judgment** (vv. 31-46) ~ our gospel

Judgment of the Nations. From the end of Mt 24 there is a building sense of readiness, preparation, responsible action, and more that lead to the doorstep of Matthew's great judgment scene, often simply described as "separating the sheep and the goats:" "*And he will separate them one from another, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. [33] He will place the sheep on his right and the goats on his left."* (v.32) And as we all know, you do not want to be a goat.

In the language of scripture scholars, it is an eschatological scene. A description from the word "eschatology" meaning the part of theology concerned with death, judgment, and the final destiny of the soul and of humankind. Given Matthew's "little apocalypse" (Mt 24:1-28) where Jesus describes the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem and the apostles plead: "*Tell us, when will this happen, and what sign will there be of your coming, and of the end of the age*?", we should not be surprised that the sacred author moves to the judgment upon the nations. The Parable of the Talent's (last Sunday) repeated invitation, "*Come, share your master's joy*" (vv. 21, 23), points to eternal glory. The language directed at the "*wicked and lazy servant*" and his ultimate fate described in v. 30 (*And throw this useless servant into the darkness outside, where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth.*) uses the eschatological terms that have become familiar from other judgment sayings and parables (8:12; 22:13; cf. 13:42, 50; 24:51).

Even though the story compares the Son of Man to a shepherd, it probably should not be classed as a parable, since the judgment is presented in a direct and straightforward way. When the Son of Man comes in his glory, he will divide "*all the nations*" into two groups. Those who have done good deeds for one of "*these least brothers of mine*" will be blessed, but those who have failed to do these deeds for one of "*these least ones*" will be condemned.

The Great Surprise. Brian Stoffregen, a Lutheran Pastor, writes that he has a love/hate relationship with this gospel:

> "I hate it, because it seems to make works the requirement for being blessed by God. There is no mention of faith or justification or forgiveness or the cross -- the acts of God that bring us salvation. Rather, the text is all about human actions."
>
> "I hate it from a family systems approach, because doing such things for others can create co-dependent relationships between the helper and those in need. We have usually answered the question: 'Am I my brother's keeper?' with 'Yes.' We are to take care of our needy brothers and sisters. Our text would support this answer. However, if we look at this answer from another perspective, we may want to change our response. Who of us wants to be 'kept'? We 'keep' animals in the zoo or pets in a pen. Such 'kept' animals are unable to survive on their own. Sometimes we may 'keep' people in a similar bondage. So, we need to struggle with how we can best care for the needy as Jesus' parable says we should. How can we do it in a way that doesn't put them or us in bondage?"
>
> "I love it, because these good works are not really works that earn us heaven because the doers of them don't realize that they have done anything good. Caring for other people is such a part of their (redeemed) nature that the caring acts come naturally, perhaps even unconsciously -- like a good tree naturally producing good fruit. It doesn't have to 'think' about producing fruit.

> They just happen. Their production is part of its nature. In the same way, the 'goats' don't realize that they have done anything wrong. 'The Great Surprise' may be a more appropriate title to this text than 'The Final Judgment.' Both groups are surprised when they hear about their good deeds (or lack thereof)."
>
> "Most of us have had a similar type of 'surprise'. Someone comes up to us and says, 'What you did for me sure helped me a lot.' or 'What you said to me had a powerful influence on my life.' While they are saying this, we are trying to remember what we said or did that was so great. Often we don't know what good we are doing -- and only later discover that we have served Christ in the least of these. On the other hand, if we assume we are doing a great job, we might be surprised to hear about what we haven't done."

All this is not to say that Christians can be quite intentional about their way of going through the world and not being surprised (while at the same time remaining humble.)

Stoffregen is raising the caution flag that reminds us Christianity has long dealt with "works" especially in the heresy of Pelagianism. Pelagianism is a late 4th century heresy that, in its most ardent forms, taught man is capable of saving himself through free will and doing what God asks while avoiding that which is forbidden. This salvation was apart from the grace of God, the merits of Christ, and the attending faith in Jesus. In modern times, semi-pelagianism is more problematic. It is a position that "yes, faith is necessary, but you also have to do works." If that is understood in the sense that faith is but a necessary precursor, such that salvation is then fully dependent upon the works – then one finds themselves outside the boundaries of orthodox Christianity as understood by Protestants, Reformers, and Catholics alike. While certainly there is much theological nuance and debate among Christian denominations, most would agree that we are saved by grace. Period. It is from cooperation with that grace that comes faith and works.

Background

This passage from Matthew is particularly dense with OT references, uses language that has already appeared in earlier Matthean verses (thus already having a contextual meaning), and because of its eschatological setting, invites comparison with other sacred writers, especially, St. Paul. Hence a bit more "context" is needed, or better said, background.

Who is being judged? Our first impression is that this is a general judgment on all humanity. But **c**oming at the end of Matthew's gospel, one in which the meaning of discipleship has been an important message, we might be tempted to think that this judgment is one upon Christians and not necessarily a general judgment. Who are "*all the nations*" and who are "*the least*"? The usual interpretation understands "*all the nations*" as including all humanity, and "*the least*" as including people in distress of some kind. Therefore, at the final judgment all humanity is to be judged according to acts of kindness done to poor and suffering people.

But is this what Matthew and his community understood by the story? In Matthew's Gospel, "*nations*" and "*all the nations*" usually refer to people other than Israel (see 4:15; 6:32; 10:5, 18; 12:18, 21; 20:19, 25; 21:43; 24:7, 9, 14; 28:19). In several passages (see 10:40–42; 18:6, 14), the "*least brothers*" seem to be Christians. If these terms have the same meaning in our gospel passage that they have elsewhere in the Gospel, "*all the nations*" are the Gentiles who have not explicitly accepted either Judaism or Christianity, and (in a strict interpretation) "*the least*" are Christians with whom the Gentiles have had some contact. According to this interpretation, the Gentiles will be judged according to acts of kindness done to Christians (see 10:40–42). [The Collegeville Bible Commentary, 1989, 898]

Can both be correct understandings? Certainly, but take note of the implications of Gentile (i.e., non-believers) being judged according to the acts of kindness done to Christians; and perhaps to non-Christians.

Either way, the theme of readiness comes to its climax in a vision of the judgment when, in fulfillment of the vision of Dan 7:13–14, the Son of Man is enthroned as judge over "*all the nations*," and the great division will take place between those who are ready and those who are not ready. Where readiness was the primary theme (preparedness and active engagement), now we find a more explicit statement of the criterion of judgment, in the way people have treated "*the least brothers of mine*."

How are they being judged? This passage has traditionally been an embarrassment especially to Protestant readers because it appears to say that one's final destiny—and nothing could be much more final than "eternal punishment" or "eternal life," v. 46—depends on acts of philanthropy, a most un-Pauline theology and one which sounds uncomfortably like Pelagianism. Some point out that the righteous don't earn the kingdom, but they *inherit* it (v. 34) and that an inheritance is determined by the giver, not the receiver. The verb "to inherit" (*kleronomeo*) is used only three times in Matthew, with three different objects:

- The meek inherit the earth (5:5)
- Those who have left everything will inherit eternal life (19:29)
- The righteous inherit the kingdom (25:34)

But there is one feature of this scene that has led probably the majority of recent interpreters to a different conclusion. The recipients of the acts of kindness are Jesus' "*least brothers*," and what is done to them is done to Him (v. 40). So, is the final judgment concerned not with response to human need in general, but to the need of disciples in particular, and thus indirectly with how people have responded to Jesus himself in the person of *the least of my brothers*? Has their response to disciples in need been their way of "acknowledging Jesus," which was presented as the basis of judgment earlier in Mt 10:32–33: "*Everyone who acknowledges me before others I will acknowledge before my heavenly Father. But whoever denies me before others, I will deny before my heavenly Father*"? [France, 2007, 957-8]

While this addresses strict Pelagianism (pure works-righteousness) it does not address the Matthean emphasis on doing the will of God as the characteristic of God's people. Some interpreters point out that this is Matthew and not Paul. Just as the preceding parables have told us that the master on his return will praise the slave who has been getting on with the job (24:46) and who has achieved good results (25:21, 23), this too is a call to good works which will be rewarded. The "*For*" which begins vv. 35 and 42 at least states that these acts of kindness are the evidence that the reward or punishment is deserved; but it may equally be read as stating the actual basis, or at least part of the basis, for the judgment given.

That interpretation has a firm foundation in the earlier language of this gospel, which has spoken of true disciples as Jesus' *brothers and sisters* (12:46–50; cf. 28:10) and has used the phrase "*these little ones*" to denote members of the disciple community (10:42; 18:6, 10, 14—note in particular 18:6, "*these little ones who believe in me*"). In 18:5 we have been told that to welcome one such child in Jesus' name is to welcome him, and that child becomes the basis for the phrase "*these little ones*" in the following verses.

Anonymous Christians? It is probably right to read "*least brothers*" as a description of disciples. But to draw that conclusion does not establish that the "*sheep*" are commended because their treatment of disciples reveals their positive attitude to Jesus himself. For the striking feature of this judgment scene is that both sheep and goats claim that they *did not know* that their actions were directed toward Jesus.

Each is as surprised as the other to find their actions interpreted in that light. They have helped, or failed to help, not a Jesus recognized in his representatives, but a Jesus *incognito.* As far as they were concerned, it was simply an act of kindness to a fellow human being in need, not an expression of their attitude to Jesus. They seem closer to what some modern theologians call "anonymous Christians" than to openly declared supporters of Jesus himself.

So it does not seem to be possible to read this passage as expressing a "Pauline" doctrine of salvation through explicit faith in Jesus. A systematic theologian can devise a scheme whereby justification by grace through faith and judgment according to works are together parts of a greater whole, but Matthew is not writing systematic theology, and the present passage brings to its fullest expression his conviction that when the Son of Man comes he will "*repay every person according to what they have done*." (16:27) This is the ultimate outworking of the Matthean motif of reward for those who have lived according to the will of God. And that will is here spelled out in terms of the way people have responded to the human needs of "*least brothers*."

That being said, as Boring points out, this scene is absent the language of grace, faith, justification, or the forgiveness of sin. "What counts is whether one has acted with loving care for needy people. Such deeds are not a matter of 'extra credit,' but constitute the decisive criterion of judgment presupposed in all of vv.23-25, the 'weightier matters of the Law' of 23:32." [Boring, 1994, 455]

Sovereignty. The debate about the criterion of judgment, however, theologically important as it is, should not be allowed to distract the reader from what is likely the main thrust of this passage: its portrayal of the ultimate sovereignty of the Son of Man as the universal judge. This theme has been developed in Matthew echoing the imagery of Dan 7:13–14. That passage provides the language for the scene in v. 31. The sovereign authority displayed in the judgment on the temple (24:30) now finds its eschatological counterpart in the judgment of all nations (v. 32). The focus on Jesus' *parousia* in the preceding part of the discourse from 24:36 to 25:30 encourages the reader to associate this final judgment also with the *parousia,* as part of the same complex of eschatological motifs, but the scene itself is apparently set, like that of Dan 7:9–14, in the heavenly throne room, to which all people are summoned. There is no indication within this passage of the Son of Man coming *to earth,* unless that is assumed to be the meaning of the language of Dan 7:13, and we have already seen repeatedly that that is not how the Daniel vision is framed. The word *parousia* is not used here. The "coming" of v. 31 is no more specifically *parousia* language than it was in 24:30 and in all the other allusions to Dan 7:13–14; it is the context rather than the wording of this passage which allows the reader to associate this judgment scene with the time of the *parousia.* [France, 2007, 960]

Christological Titles

Eugene Boring points out that "a number of Christological titles important throughout Matthew converge in this scene." Namely, "Son of Man" (v.31) who has "God as his father" (v.34). "King" which points to Messiah and Son of David - and also called "Lord." He is the "messianic shepherd who cares for the sheep…and the judge who makes the final separation between sheep and goats." [Boring, 1994, 455]

Commentary

Fulfillment. *[31] "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit upon his glorious throne, [32] and all the nations will be assembled before him."* Matthew, writing to a largely Jewish Christian audience, has, from the beginning, relied heavily on OT imagery and scenes. And as this commentary explores, and has already noted, the verses are particularly dense with OT references.

The imagery starts in the opening verse. The most evident echo is from Daniel and the wider setting found there: "*As the visions during the night continued, I saw coming with the clouds of heaven One like a son of man. When he reached the Ancient of Days and was presented before him, He received dominion, splendor, and kingship; all nations, peoples and tongues will serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, his kingship, one that shall not be destroyed.*" (Dan 7:13-14)

The Matthean use of "The Son of Man," "comes," "glory" all directly echo the verses in Daniel, as does the idea of enthronement. Matthew also echoes Daniel 7:9-10 from which we have the specific mention of "throne," the gathering of angels, and the idea of judgment. There is one important difference. In Daniel's scene it is God himself seated on the throne of judgment. In Matthew it is now the Son of Man, fulfilling what was depicted in Dan 7:14.

This fulfillment also points to something more. There is also an important translation that Matthew provides in v.34. There the Son of Man is described simply as "the king": "*Then the king will say to those on his right.*" In this simple verse the promised kingdom of God (heaven) is identified and fulfilled in the kingship of the Son of Man (13:41; 16:28; 19:28; cf. 20:21). [France, 2007, 950]

Given the clear connection to The Book of Daniel, it is easy to pass over another echo in the phrase "*all the angels with him*." One will find a similar phrase in Zech 14:5 which depicts the salvific coming of God accompanied by "*all the holy ones*." In these climactic visions, then, the OT expectation of the eschatological visitation of God in judgment and salvation finds its fulfillment in Jesus the Son of Man who sits on *his* glorious throne and pronounces judgment. (Note: the Book of Revelation also joins Daniel and Zechariah to provide a passage that speaks to both judgment and salvation). [*ibid*]

As depicted in Joel 3:1–12, all the nations are gathered into judgment (see the earlier discussion on this phrase). Again, a passage that depicts God himself as judge, is echoed in a description of judgment by the Son of Man. In Joel the judgment is specifically of the Gentiles in relation to their mistreatment of Israel, but there is no such restriction here, and in the light of the judgment on Jerusalem in ch. 24 it seems likely that Jews and Gentiles together are called to this final examination. As discussed above, the eschatological tone of the whole pericope indicates that this judgment is universal, including both professing disciples and other people without distinction.

All the Nations *[32] And he will separate them one from another, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. [33] He will place the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.* The distinction and division in the end times does not make its first appearance here at the end of Matthew. The image has recurred in many different contexts in this gospel; to note several instances: 7:13–27; 8:11–12; 10:32–33; 13:40–43, 49–50; 16:25–26 and the whole of 24:36–25:30. Now it is underlined by an image perhaps based on Ezek 34:17 where God, the shepherd, judges between different members of his flock. In the Middle East sheep and goats were (and are) often pastured in mixed flocks.

Joachim Jeremias, an eminent Scripture scholar of a previous generation and oft quoted spoke of the implied imagery within v.32, He held that sheep are the more valuable animals generally, but, moreover because of their white color in contrast to the black of the goats. Further this makes them a symbol of the righteous in this judgment scene. However, the sheep, though generally lighter colored than goats, are not as predominantly white as the flocks familiar to us; some are brown and some have substantial dark patches (even when clean!), so that it can take a practiced eye to distinguish the two species – a divine eye perhaps. [France, 2007, 961]

It is at this point the narrative takes on the form of a simile. The imagery provides a memorable illustration of the final division of people who have up to that point lived together indistinguishably — cf. the imagery of the wheat and the weeds (13:29–30) or of the foolish and wise bridesmaids

(25:1–12). To other people (and even to themselves), the saved and the lost may look very similar; it takes the expertise of the "king" to know which is which. [France, 2007, 962]

The Blessed. *[34] 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.* As noted above, the "Son of Man" is now depicted as "king." It is the king himself who points out "*my Father.*" The Christological implications are clear – and even though it comes from the Gospel of John, one is hard pressed not to be reminded (John 5:27) where Jesus tells his disciples that all authority has been given to the Son to implement judgment.

"Blessed" (*eulogeō*) here is the same word as in the quotations of Ps 118:26 in Mt 21:9; 23:39. It denotes someone who enjoys God's good favor; it is a more theologically loaded word than *makarios,* "happy" (traditionally translated "blessed") as used in the Beatitudes.

The blessedness of those on the right hand is spelled out as inheriting a kingdom. As mentioned elsewhere "kingdom" would be better translated as "kingship" in order to indicate a ruling authority rather than a place. This kingdom/kingship which is sometimes taken to mean, as in the first and last Beatitudes in 5:3, 10, that they are confirmed as members of God's kingdom, as his accepted subjects, who will therefore share its eternal blessings (summed up in v. 46 as "eternal life"). But this "kingship" is not here said to be "the kingdom of God/heaven". Rather it is a kingship prepared "*for you:"* they themselves will become kings, sharing in the kingly authority of their Lord. This is what Jesus has promised to the Twelve in 19:28, and the same idea is found in Luke 12:32 where the kingship is given to the "little flock" of Jesus' disciples. The theme of disciples sharing Jesus' kingship will recur elsewhere in the NT: see 1 Cor 4:8; Eph 2:6; Rev 1:6; 5:10; 20:6; 22:5. Thus the "righteous" will receive the status of "kings," an even stronger statement of the principle we have seen in 24:47; 25:21, 23 that faithfulness is rewarded by additional authority. [France, 2007, 962]

This new status is not an afterthought but the culmination of God's purpose for them "*from the foundation of the world."* We have noted in 20:23 (""My cup you will indeed drink, but to sit at my right and at my left (, this) is not mine to give but is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father.") the idea that God has already "prepared" who is to sit at Jesus' right and left in his kingship; here the idea is extended beyond those specific places of honor to all who will "inherit" that kingship, and that decision predates the creation of the world. As with other such apparently deterministic language in the NT, it is possible to read "for you" here in either a more general or a more personal sense. Traditional Calvinism has favored the more rigorous, personal interpretation that concludes that the identity of the individuals who will enjoy these blessings is already decreed before they are born. Others have understood the "you" to refer to the class of the saved as a whole: God has prepared this kingship for those who will prove to be worthy of it, but who those people will be remains to be discovered on the basis of their response to the gospel and to the will of God. On that reading what is determined in advance is that those who prove at the time of judgment to be "sheep" will inherit the kingship, rather than that certain individuals have been "pre-selected" before their birth to be "sheep."

Why We Do What We Do. *[35] For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, [36] naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me.' [37] Then the righteous will answer him and say, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? [38] When did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? [39] When did we see you ill or in prison, and visit you?'*

The list of hardships and the response to them is often considered only lightly as attention is given to the response of the righteous: "yes we did those things, but when did we do them for you?" Yet the list of hardships can be viewed several different ways. The list covers many of the most basic human needs - see the similar but shorter list in Isa 58:7,10. The hardships are not specific to any one group or one

time. Considering the state of the developing world in our time, as contrasted to the western nations, the list of hardships may well represent common experience. Some have argued that The only items in the list which might be thought to indicate a particularly Christian element are being a foreigner and being in prison, if these are understood as some of the occupational hazards faced by those who traveled and incurred opposition as preachers of the gospel. But Christians have no monopoly on such experiences, and in the mobile and politically volatile world of the Roman Empire there would be many others who shared them.

The acts of kindness listed were expected on the basis of the duty of hospitality as it was and still is honored in Middle Eastern society, but no doubt performance did not always match up to expectation. The only act which might seem to go beyond the normal call of duty is the visiting of a prisoner, particularly if they were not a member of the family, and in Heb 10:34 this is mentioned as a mark of Christian love shown toward persecuted fellow-Christians (cf. Heb 13:3). But it is questionable whether that particular scenario is the only one to explain these words. Prisons, for whatever reason one was put in them, were places of misery, where survival often depended on someone visiting and supplying the basic needs to food, warm clothing, and medical supplies.

The "*sheep*" are now described as "*righteous*" in anticipation of the final verdict in v. 46. If "righteousness" in Matthew is doing the will of God the term is well applied to these people who have given practical expression to Jesus' basic summary of the law, by treating others as they would wish to be treated themselves (7:12; cf. also 22:39–40). Their surprise when the king/Son of Man himself claims to have been the object of their action seems to be in contrast to their notion they were merely meeting human need.

Solidarity. *[40] And the king will say to them in reply, 'Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.'* The words "*Amen, I say to you,"* here and in v. 45 emphasize the principle of solidarity. Whether they knew it or not, the people they helped were associated with Jesus, to such an extent that they could be said to *be* Jesus. The more general principle of Proverb 19:17 that "*Whoever cares for the poor lends to the Lord*" is specifically applied to Jesus and his people. The terms used in this verse strongly reflect language used earlier in this gospel to describe Jesus' disciples as "*these little ones*" (10:42; 18:6, 10, 14) and as Jesus' "*brothers and sisters*" (12:50; cf. also 28:10). Jesus has spoken in 18:20 of being present where his people have come together in his name. Here his identification with his people goes further: their experiences are his experiences, and what is done to them is done to him – see, e.g., 10:40, "*"Whoever receives you receives me"* and 18:5, "*And whoever receives one child such as this in my name receives me."* This passage thus expands on the message of 10:40–42: how people respond to Jesus' representatives is both a sign of their attitude to him and the basis for their reward. This sense of solidarity between Jesus and his people will be creatively developed by the author of Hebrews when he explains how it was necessary for the Savior to share the experiences of those he saves, so that he rightly calls them his brothers and sisters (Heb 2:10–18).

Accursed. *[41] Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you accursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.* The words spoken to those on the left are the mirror image of those spoken in v. 34 to the "*righteous*:" "*depart*" instead of "*come*," "*accursed*" instead of "*blessed*," "*eternal fire*" instead of kingship, and a fate prepared in advance, though in this case not specifically for "you" but for the devil and his angels, whose lot the unrighteous are to share.

The blessing in v. 34 was specifically attributed to "my Father," but this verse stops short of saying explicitly that these people are cursed *by God.* This is, however, often the implication of an unattributed passive, and here the reference must be to the displeasure of God that results in their

punishment. Nonetheless, it is also possible to read the passage and say this is the fate you have chosen for yourself apart from God, just as you lived your life apart from God.

As to the phrase "*eternal fire,*" fire has been a repeated image for ultimate judgment; see 3:10, 12; 5:22; 7:19; 13:40, 42, 50; 18:8, 9. If we are to maintain any parallelism with v. 34, then we would expect "*prepared for you since the foundation of the world*," but that is not said here. The kingship prepared from the beginning reflects the desire of God that all be saved (1 Tim 2:4). Lacking such fire prepared from the foundation of all things, there is thus a difference between God's eternal purpose of blessing and the regrettable need for a "plan B" to deal with spiritual rebellion.

The devil and his angels represent all the forces of spiritual evil, probably including the demons or "unclean spirits" we have met throughout the gospel as Jesus' opponents in cases of exorcism. In much Jewish thought by this time Satan was pictured as the leader of a spiritual host in opposition to God and his angels, and it is the ultimate elimination of all that spiritual opposition which is here envisaged. The theme will be graphically developed in the book of Revelation where the devil and all his followers are thrown at last into the lake of fire (Rev 19:20; 20:10, 14–15; 21:8). There, as here, the same punishment is awarded to human beings who have followed Satan as to his spiritual forces. And there, as here, the offenses listed seem hardly to fit so melodramatic an end: they include the "cowardly" and "liars" as well as murderers and idolaters (Rev 21:8), just as here the failure to provide humanitarian aid may seem to us relatively low on the scale of spiritual evil. But the imagery of this pericope, as of the book of Revelation, allows for only two categories, the saved and the lost; there is no allowance for grades of good or evil.

What We Fail To Do. *[42] For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, [43] a stranger and you gave me no welcome, naked and you gave me no clothing, ill and in prison, and you did not care for me.' [44] Then they will answer and say, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or ill or in prison, and not minister to your needs?' [45] He will answer them, 'Amen, I say to you, what you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me.'* The exchange between the king and the accursed mirrors the exchange with the righteous, though suitably abbreviated to avoid tedious repetition – even absenting "*brothers and sisters*" with reference to the "*least ones*" in v. 45. The list is the same, the perplexed "*when did we see you*" response, and the King's reply. One contrast might lie in something small. In v.44, summarizing the actions of the accursed, they ask when they did "*not minister to your needs*?" In the language of the NT one would expect to find the work/root *diakoneō* – from which we take the modern word "deacon." It is a word that is used in Matthew (4:11; 8:15; 27:55, 20:26; 23:11) to describe the unselfish care for others which marks true discipleship. The fault of the "*accursed*" is not so much that they have done wrong but that they have failed to do what is commanded of them. It echoes the parable of the bridesmaids (vv. 1–12) and the servants (vv. 24–27).

Salvation or Perdition. *[46] And these will go off to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."* There are only two possible outcomes to the judgment. The phrase "*eternal life*" is already familiar to us from 19:16, 29 (cf. also 7:14; 18:8, 9) where it has been seen to be synonymous with being saved or with entering the kingdom of heaven. This is, however, the only time we meet the phrase "*eternal punishment"* in Matthew, or indeed in the whole NT. It appears to be synonymous with the "*eternal fire"* of v. 41 and of 18:8, and cf. the "*fire of Gehenna*" of 5:22 and 18:9.

All these passages raise the question whether this fire is regarded as destroying and thus annihilating those consigned to it, or as a continuing agony of conscious punishment such as is explicitly attributed to the devil, the beast and the false prophet in the lake of fire in Rev 20:10. In the debate among evangelical theologians on the issue of annihilation as against continuing punishment, the phrase "eternal punishment" here in Matt 25:46 is commonly cited as a proof-text for the latter position. But

this is usually on the assumption that "eternal" is a synonym for "everlasting." That assumption depends more on modern English usage than on the meaning of *aiōnios,* which we have seen to be related to the concept of the two ages. "Eternal punishment", so understood, is punishment that relates to the age to come rather than punishment that continues forever, so that the term does not in itself favor one side or the other in the annihilationist debate. In so far as the metaphor of fire may be pressed, however, it suggests destruction rather than punishment, especially if the imagery of the incineration of rubbish is understood to underlie the idea of hell (Gehenna was originally the dump site for Jerusalem where the city's garbage was burned – and as you can imagine for a city such as Jerusalem – the fires were 24/7 and smoldered incessantly.) The fire of Gehenna goes on burning not because the rubbish is not destroyed by it, but because more is continually added. The imagery of incineration in relation to the final destiny of the wicked also occurs more explicitly in 13:42: the weeds are destroyed, not kept burning forever. We have also noted the use of the verb "destroy" in relation to hell in 10:28. These pointers suggest that an annihilationist theology (sometimes described as "conditional immortality") does more justice to Matthew's language in general, and if so the sense of "eternal punishment" here will not be "punishment which goes on forever" but "punishment which has eternal consequences", the loss of eternal life through being destroyed by fire.

A Final Thought: Not Keeping Score. Richard Jensen (*Preaching Matthew's Gospel, 220-22*) has comments from his book about this parable which I thought I would share:

> The righteous are surprised. They don't know their deeds. They haven't kept score. Their left hand doesn't seem to know what their right hand is doing (Matthew 6:3)....
>
> The righteous were righteous because of their deeds and they didn't know it. They didn't know their own righteousness.... The righteousness of the sheep was precisely an alien righteousness. They didn't even know they possessed it!...
>
> Note that in the story the opposite is also true. The unrighteous ones know their deeds. They have kept score.... The unrighteous are quite confident about their righteousness. It is always so with humanly crafted righteousness. Those who measure their righteousness on human scales are in for a shock at the day of judgment. "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven..." (Matthew 7:21)....
>
> Jesus' vision makes it clear. The life of the Christian is a life given in love to the least of these. But that's good works, isn't it? Won't such good works for our neighbor destroy the "faith alone" foundation of our faith? (We Lutherans actually worry about this at times.) The answer to our question is "No." Our good works will not destroy our "faith alone" posture. We can do all the loving of the least and little ones we can possibly imagine and not be liable to belief in works-righteousness. We are called to do lots of good works. We are also called not to keep score. When we keep score of our deeds we want to credit our love of neighbor to our heavenly bank account. Loving our neighbor is not the problem. Keeping score of our good deeds of neighbor-love is the problem. The truly righteous don't keep score. Their left hand doesn't know what their right hand is doing. Such as these will stand before the Sovereign one day clothed in Christ's righteousness alone.

Notes

Matthew 25:32 ***all the nations***: before the end the gospel will have been preached throughout the world (Matthew 24:14); thus the Gentiles will be judged on their response to it. But the phrase all the nations includes the Jews also.

Matthew 25:34 *kingdom*: It is generally a serious mistake to translate the phrase *basileia tou theou* with "the kingdom of God" as referring to a particular area in which God rules. The meaning of this phrase in the NT involves not a particular place or special period of time but the fact of ruling. An expression such as "to enter the kingdom of God" thus does not refer to "going to heaven" but should be understood as "accepting God's rule" or "welcoming God to rule over."

as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats: Joachim Jeremias stated that at the end of the day the mixed flock must be separated, perhaps for milking, but also because the less hardy goats need to be taken indoors while the sheep prefer to stay in the open; this explanation has been repeated by subsequent commentators without further evidence. Others rightly point out that ἔριφος normally means a "kid" as opposed to a full-grown goat, and suggests that the young he-goats are being separated off for slaughter.

Matthew 25:41 *fire prepared...his angels*: 1 Enoch 10:13 (a non-canonical apocalyptic writing) where it is said of the evil angels and Semyaza, their leader, "In those days they will lead them into the bottom of the fire—and in torment—in the prison (where) they will be locked up forever."

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