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Humanitarianism with a Point

Who was Christ referring to as “the least of My brothers” in Matthew 25? The answer to this question has profound implications for the Church’s approach to missions—and member care.

“Inasmuch as you have done it to one of these the least of My brothers, you have done it to Me” (Matthew 25:40). Few verses are used more frequently than this verse by Christian humanitarian organizations. Whether the appeal is to invest in a ministry to prison inmates or to give to a ministry to feed the hungry and clothe the needy, this is the “John 3:16” of the charitable organizations. It is the verse which validates and underscores the biblical basis of such ministries to the less fortunate people of any society.

Understanding God’s Heart for the Poor and Needy

Let there be no doubt about it, the Bible makes clear a Christian’s responsibility toward the poor and needy. Jesus was anointed of the Spirit to “preach good news to the poor” (Luke 4:18). He seemed to show special concern for those who lacked life’s essentials, the poor and the oppressed. Thus He instructed His disciples to “sell your possessions and give to the poor” (Luke 1:33). He affirmed the Jewish practice of alms giving, placing it on a level with practices of prayer and fasting (Matthew 6:1-4). In the parable of the “Good Samaritan” Jesus clearly identified one’s obligation to “go and do likewise” for a neighbor in need irrespective of ethnicity or socioeconomic standing (Luke 10:25-37).

By such teaching Jesus identified with God’s concern for the poor in the Old Testament where the God of Israel is described as “a stronghold to the poor, a stronghold to the needy in his distress” (Isaiah 25:4). Howard Snyder (1975) is right when he concludes that “there is biblical evidence for God’s particular concern for the poor... if one takes the trouble to look for it” (p. 41).

Understanding the Parable of the Sheep and The Goats

But is unconditional humanitarianism the point of the parable of the sheep and goats in Matthew 25? Perhaps we need to take a second look at what Jesus intended to teach in light of the context in which the parable is found, namely, the “Olivet Discourse.” Mat-

threw 24:4-35 outlines Jesus' remarks concerning when the temple of Jerusalem and its buildings will be destroyed and "what will be the sign of His coming and the end of the age" (vs. 3). Since no one knows the exact day or hour of His coming, not even Jesus Himself, the need for "watching" is imperative (vs. 36ff). To underscore the meaning and significance of such alertness Jesus told several parables. The parable of the sheep and goats is the final parable and concludes the Olivet Discourse as found in Matthew.

Simply stated, the parable of the sheep and goats pinpoints the basis of judgment of the nations. Jesus, when He comes in His glory as the Son of Man, will separate the nations (*ethne*) of the earth into two groups, sheep and goats. The basis of this division will be their response to "the least of these my brethren." Those identified as sheep responded positively. They fed, gave drink, provided hospitality, clothed, cared for, and visited Jesus' brethren when they were in prison. The goats, on the other hand, did none of this. In both cases neither the sheep nor the goats were aware of when they had so responded and they ask the question, "When did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison...?" (vs. 37,44). Thus, the identity of the "least of these My brethren" is crucial for a proper understanding of the basis of judgment.

A survey of commentators indicates that the majority hold "the least of these My brethren" to be oppressed and suffering humanity. Typical of the comments of such writers is the comment of R.V.G. Tasker: "In virtue of the divine compassion and the infinite sympathy shown in His life on earth, the Son of Man has come to feel the sorrows and afflictions of the children of men as though they were His own. He can, therefore, in a real sense refer to the suffering men and women as His brethren" (p. 238).

In light of such interpretation no wonder contemporary Christian humanitarian organizations use Matthew 25:40 as they do. But again, we ask, is such unconditional humanitarianism the point of the parable?

Matthew 12:46-50 clearly states that Jesus' "brothers and mother" (i.e. His family) is "whoever does the will of My Father in heaven." The parallel passage in Luke 8:21 describes the "brothers" of Jesus as those who "hear God's word and put it into practice." Who are Jesus' brothers? Those who are hearers and doers of His word, namely, those who are His disciples who "continue in His word" (John 8:31). Such close identity of Jesus with His disciples is clearly taught in Matthew 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 a cup of cold water to one of these little ones *because* he is *My disciple*, I will tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward. (italics added).

Therefore, one's response to Jesus' disciples is one's response to Jesus Himself and to the Father who sent Him. Is not this reality the basis of Jesus' question to Saul on the Damascus road, "Why do you persecute Me?" (Acts 9:1-5)? Had not Saul's persecution of believers in Jerusalem, in fact, been a persecution of Jesus Himself? It seems so.

If this is a proper interpretation of the word "brethren," then the point of the parable of the sheep and goats is even more pointed. Earlier in the Olivet Discourse Jesus had said that "this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness to all nations" (*ethne*) before the end came (Matthew 24:14). Apparently this parable assumes such a worldwide witness to all nations through Christ's disciples. Therefore, the basis of judgment of the nations rests on their response to these disciples and thus to Je-

Jesus Himself. A positive response indicates a sheep, a negative response indicates a goat, for accompanying this worldwide witness also would be persecution, for Jesus Himself also had told His disciples that they would be “hated by all nations” (Matthew 24:9).

Apparently the universal proclamation of the gospel of the kingdom will be accompanied by a universal positive and negative response to that proclamation in that some will show kindness to persecuted believers/disciples while others will not. Some will give them something to eat and drink and take them into their homes, caring for the sick and even visiting those in prison for their witness to Christ. Others will do just the opposite. Such response to Christ’s messengers indicated their response to their message and to the One who had sent them, Jesus Himself.

Rejection of “the least of these Jesus’ brethren” is in reality a rejection of Him. It was this point of identity with Jesus that apparently occasioned the question of surprise on the part of both sheep and goats, “When did we do this *to you?*” The element of surprise was *not* their treatment of followers of Jesus. Rather it was in their treatment of Christ Himself who was identified with such disciples. The issue was *not* unconditional humanitarianism to mankind generally, or even unconscious humanitarianism to Christ’s disciples specifically. The issue was unconscious kindness to Christ Himself...or the lack of it. The parable of the sheep and goats teaches humanitarianism, but with a point.

Understanding the Implications of the Parable

The implications of such an understanding of this parable are significant. First, the parable assumes the universal preaching of the gospel is not optional in the plan of God. “Missions” is not an appendage on the Church’s agenda. It is essential. A worldwide witness is the foundation for the judgment of the nations.

Second, accompanying this universal witness to Jesus Christ will be persecution. Indeed, “all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (II Timothy 3:12). Opposition for one’s faith in Christ is not just for believers in the Middle East and Asia. Christ’s disciples will be “hated by all nations” because they are in all nations.

Third, the place of hospitality and kindness toward followers of Jesus Christ is no small matter, particularly toward those who are being persecuted for their faith in Him. “Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering” (Hebrews 12:3). “By this shall all men know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another” (John 14:35). In the words of the Apostle Paul, “Let us do good to all men, *especially* to those of the household of faith” (Galatians 6:10, italics added).

Is it not time we free this pointed parable of the sheep and the goats to speak clearly and fully of the crucial place of the universal preaching of the gospel to *every nation* (*ethne*) and the opposition and persecution that will attend such preaching? And is it not time we free this pointed parable to speak clearly and fully of the essential need of intentional humanitarianism—member care—toward those who have chosen to suffer loss for their witness to Christ in these nations?

Humanitarianism with a point is the point, and the point is “for, inasmuch as you have done it to one of the least of these My brothers, *you have done it to Me*”! And never has a proper understanding of this pointed parable been more important than it is as we enter the new millennium in which the Church increasingly focuses on the final frontiers, many of which are in risky and resistant areas.

Reflection and Discussion

1. Do you agree with the author's understanding of the identity of the "least of these My brethren"? Why?
2. What is your understanding of God's promise that those who bless His people will be blessed, but those who curse them will be cursed (Genesis 12:3)? Can you think of any illustrations in Scripture that the way a people/nation responded to God's people determined how God responded to them? Can you think of any examples of this today?
3. What are some of the implications of the author's understanding of the parable of the sheep and goats, for missions and for member care?
4. What accounts for such different responses to Christ's messengers? Is the problem with the messengers, the message, the host culture, and/or other factors?
5. What has been your response to persecuted followers of Christ?

References

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