

Gospel: Matthew 25:31-46

[Jesus said to the disciples:] 31“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. 32All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, 33and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. 34Then the king will say 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; 35for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, 36I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ 37Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? 38And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? 39And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ 40And the king will answer them, ‘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.’ 41Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; 42for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ 44Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ 45Then he will answer 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.’ 46And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

The last judgment scene is the final and climactic passage in Jesus’ discourse on the end times. Jesus is portrayed in his glorious return as a shepherd, an image Matthew employs throughout his Gospel.

Shepherds at this time routinely had mixed flocks. At night, they separated the sheep from the goats. Sheep enjoyed the open air of the pasture, while goats had to be protected from the cold. (Sheep had more commercial value and were preferred.)

The picture of the Son of Man as shepherd morphs into the image of Jesus as king.

The first five actions were typical Jewish works of mercy. (Jews did not use imprisonment as a punishment.)

“Nations” and “least ones”

One option: Matthew uses “nations” to refer to Gentiles in other contexts; “little ones” to signify Jesus’ followers. So, the judgment of Gentiles is based on whether the Gentiles have dealt mercifully with Jesus’ disciples, either missionaries or ordinary Christians.

More popular option: “nations” refers to all peoples, and the “least ones” to anyone who is in need.

Matthew has shown earlier that Jesus, in his role as the definitive interpreter of Torah, emphasizes the importance of love, love that is to be manifested to ALL.

His ministry is marked by compassion for others, compassion that led him to perform acts of mercy such as the ones enumerated in this passage. It is no coincidence that Jesus—who declared that he “came not to be served but to serve—demands that service be rendered to those in need.

In addition, Matthew presents Jesus as Immanuel, God-with-us. Jesus’ expressed solidarity with those most in need for compassion suggest another way he continues to be present. It also indicates an essential way his followers are to love and serve him as they wait for his glorious return.

Connection to Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5...): Matthew’s description of the last judgment ends with the notice that “the righteous” will be called to inherit eternal life. These are the merciful who are blessed, the people whose hunger and thirst for righteousness leads them to respond with compassion to the hunger and thirst of others. Jesus teaches that God’s reign—the full revelation of which we await—is characterized in the present, not by powerful works and miracles, but by deeds of love, mercy, and compassion, especially toward those most in need.

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Matthew’s depiction of the last judgment is like a wellness check. its purpose is not to condemn or scare but to provide a snapshot of our overall health, development, learning and growth that should lead to new habits and ways of life. After all, as our doctor wants us to flourish, so does our Creator, Redeemer, Judge, and King.

According to 24:10-14, growing antagonism and cooling love are among the most dangerous cancers facing followers of Christ. Distancing ourselves from others, allowing apathy to grow in us like a tumor, expecting that our actions have no real consequences, or relying too heavily on past love and care of others are critical concerns. The image of the Son of Man one day separating sheep and goats is a diagnostic tool designed to inspire faithfulness, root out self-centered living, and help each of us measure who and where we are as we grow in the likeness of Christ.

The righteous are surprised to find out they had cared for the king of creation; evidently, they simply share who they were and what they had freely, without calculation or expectation.

The King was looking for a natural overflowing of love, not calculated efforts designed to project a certain image.