

# The Least of These My Brethren?

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If you took a moment to do a search on the internet for the words “Matthew 25,” among various online Bible references, you would find a litany of different churches, social groups, and agencies who have adopted this chapter as the title of some kind of humanitarian or social outreach. You will find a Mathew 25 relief and humanitarian aid group, a Matthew 25 service for those who have HIV or AIDS, and a Matthew 25 dental group providing dental care for those who cannot afford it. Most recently a Matthew 25 political group, wanting to get the “evangelical left” to vote for a particular presidential nominee, has been started. The rationale behind their proposal of this individual, the nominee has a Christian concern for “social justice” and meeting the needs of those who have been oppressed in society. Of course there is the Matthew 25 prison ministries. But the list would not be complete without a Matthew 25 mutual fund. I was actually kind of surprised that I did not find a Matthew 25 dating service.

But is Matthew 25:31-46 to be understood as teaching that Christians are called to meet the needs of the poor and needy in society at large? While I would affirm that Christians are taught, in the Scriptures, to be merciful to the poor and needy in society, that is not the emphasis of this text. The emphasis of this text is on ministering to the needs of the saints. It is the evidence of a true follower of Christ that is in view. Jesus has been giving a series of parables dealing with His second coming and the reality that there will be many members of the visible church who will not enter into the eternal kingdom when He comes. The parable of the ten virgins and the parable of the talents highlights the need for covenant members to take heed to what they have done in connection with the means they have received from God.

At the outset of this section of Matthew’s Gospel Jesus is said to come in His glory with all the holy angels and sit upon His throne. There is, then, a focus on the deity of Jesus Christ. He is the just judge of all the earth. The nations, He goes on to tell us, will be gathered before Him and He will separate the sheep from the goats. There is an emphasis on two kinds of people—sheep and goats. These two groups are also called, in the text, the “blessed” and the “cursed.” Understanding this is fundamental to coming to a right interpretation of the passage. When Jesus finally comes to test each group saying, “I was hungry and you...,” “I was thirsty and you...,” “I was naked and you...,” etc. it is not what they do, or fail to do, that makes them what they are. In fact the opposite is true. The sheep do what they do because they are sheep and “blessed” of the Father in heaven, and the goats do what they do, or fail to do what they should do, because they are goats and cursed. It is important to keep this in perspective. This text is not teaching that someone becomes a

disciple of Christ or enters the kingdom of God because of what they do. They manifest what God has made them by their actions.

It is important to keep in mind that the focus remains on Jesus: “*I was hungry and you fed Me, etc.*” Jesus does not say, “When you saw a hungry man you fed him, and when you saw a thirsty man you gave him drink.” The Lord is pointing to a relationship He sustains to “the brethren.” Jesus never refers to His enemies as “brethren” in the Gospels. He does use the words “the least of these,” or “one of these little ones,” or “the brethren” throughout Matthew’s Gospel to refer to all who would be His disciples.

The point of the passage is that Jesus represents His people and they are united to Him as the body is united to the head. What happens to them happens to Him, so to speak. This is what our Lord meant when He said to Saul of Tarsus on the Damascus road, “Saul, Saul why are you persecuting Me?” Saul was going to persecute Christians, but Christ saw that as an attack on Himself. This is what He means when He says, “In as much as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren you did it to Me.” We are called to love the brethren. And we will if we love Christ. If we do not love the brethren then we do not love Christ. Our response to Christ’s call to repent and believe the Gospel will manifest itself in how we treat other professing Christians. Jesus said as much when He told the disciples, “All men will know that you are My disciples by the love that you have for one another.” The goats in the account are also professed believers. They say to Jesus, “Lord when did we see you hungry and not feed you...?” In the two parables that proceed this passage the unbelievers all call Jesus ‘Lord.’ This should serve as a real warning to those in the church of Jesus Christ who do not have a saving faith that is evidenced by their love for the brethren, the Church, those members of the household of faith.

The responses of the two groups are indicative of what they are trusting in. The sheep say, “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you?” The sheep did not let their left hand know what their right was doing. They were in the practice of caring for the brethren, not trying to gain favor with God by doing good works. The goats, on the other hand, said, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and did not feed You...?’ The goats seem to think that they had been doing good things and are surprised to find that they had not been doing them. A similar response is given by those who say, “Lord, Lord, didn’t we prophecy in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and do many wonders in Your name?” But the Lord does not care what they *did*, He cares whether they really knew Him, or were known by Him. Notice that Jesus says to the goats, ‘Depart from Me I never *knew* you.’ In Matthew 26 Jesus shows us that among the disciples there are sheep and goats.

While it is utterly important to stress that Christians must be merciful to all, to care for the hungry, the thirsty, the sick, the imprisoned, and the outcasts of society, Matthew 25:31-46 is teaching something very different. It is teaching us to “do good...especially to the

household of faith.” It is teaching us that we belong to a body, over which Christ is the head. It is teaching us that we manifest what we are by how we treat those that Christ has gathered together in one body. It is teaching that on the day of judgment all hypocrites will be driven away by Christ into everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels because they did not love Him. They are shown to be what they are by the fact that they did not care for the people of Christ. The focus is on Jesus Christ, and what men do with the message of the Gospel. Our profession is shown to be truthful by our lives in regard to the “least” of Christ’s brethren.

We often hear the statement God first, then family and lastly Church? Though it is well-intentioned, this little 'formula' is totally unbiblical. To say that makes folks very uncomfortable. However, it is always Christ first, and the church is not an afterthought but His Bride and you cannot separate the person of Christ from His bride as though she deserves less attention and devotion than our own families. It's simply God, God and then God...obey God and Family and Church will fall right into place. If we follow Him it may be very difficult sometimes for the family and may require much sacrifice in order to fulfill Christ's mission through His Family, the church. I am not making light of the difficulty involved in trying to balance everything and there are certainly Biblical responsibilities towards family, but I have seen the popular 'formula' used to justify all manner of selfish family time resulting in little or no commitment to the local church. And then it is touted as though this family-centered lifestyle is somehow righteous. If the 'formula' were true, none of the great missionaries and heroes of the faith that we admire so much would have turned their world upside down for Christ. It cost them dearly, often in the area of family. And yet I have read of missionaries who left their children with relatives while they went off to 'serve God' and I thought "Oh how terrible"....only to keep reading and see that in their old age their grown children had joined them and were right there pouring out their lives on the mission field also. Not saying that's for everyone, but just saying that God honors obedience above all else. Jesus commended those who would 'leave mother and father, brother and sister, houses and land" for His sake and the sake of the Gospel. Putting little Johnny's sports life ahead of the Body of Christ, is in my opinion, idolatry.