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# So What Does Separate the Sheep from the Goats?

## A Closer Look at a Misunderstood Parable (Matthew 25:31-46)\*

By G.H. Visscher

Mixed flocks of sheep and goats, we are told, are quite common in the East. And especially when the animals are dirty and the light is dim at sunset, it takes a bit of an experienced eye to separate the sheep from the goats at the end of the day.

So too at the last judgement, it may not be so obvious to all observers – even to the participants themselves (verses 37-9, 44!) – as to who belongs to the righteous and who belongs to the unrighteous? So the question needs to be asked: what does separate the sheep from the goats? What will separate the righteous from the unrighteous on the last day?

The concern of my address this evening is the fact that there seems to be widespread misunderstanding among us about this parable.<sup>1</sup> Often when we are being encouraged to support works of charity, reference is made to this text and we are told that we need to be charitable to the poor, the hungry, and the imprisoned and the like because what we do to them we do to Christ. The Lord Jesus identifies with them all, so we had better as well. That is, after all, what separates the sheep from the goats.

It becomes somewhat of a “social gospel” among people who do not usually give much ear to voices from that corner. And it seems, if I may say so, more like justification by works among a people who really are quite steeped in the principles of grace.

Now let me make it clear from the outset: it is not that Christians do not need to bother with such works of charity! They do. Children of a charitable God become charitable themselves. But the question is: is this what *this* parable teaches? This parable is a picture of the final judgement, and of the one question that is going to be asked of all in that judgement. Is this really *the* ques-

tion that is going to be asked of everyone on the last day: what have you done for the hungry and thirsty, the sick, the strangers, the imprisoned? Or is there another question?

### Detail and context

Rather than snowing you under with many academic details this evening, by means of these questions I would like to show to you something of what we are busy with at the Theological College. The foremost subject in the Old and New Testament departments is exegesis. And, among other things, we teach the students that there are two aspects that are very important for proper exegesis.

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The first one is *detail*. Details matter. Sometimes, one little detail is what unlocks a passage. Exegesis is not unlike detective work. It is a matter of asking the right questions – especially about those details.

The first detail I would refer you to is the fact that in verse 40, these people who are hungry and imprisoned and the like are referred to as: “brothers” of the Lord Jesus. “whatever you did for one of the least of *these brothers* of mine. . . .”

The second detail is the fact that in verse 45, these same people are referred to as “*one of the least of these*. . . .” From the fact that both the word “least” and the word “brothers” is mentioned together in verse 40, it is evident that it is one group that is being referred to here. The Lord Jesus characterizes those who are hungry, sick, imprisoned and the

like as being his brothers, even the least among his brothers.

### Who are they?

Who then are these lowly brothers? Besides the matter of detail, there is also that of *context*. It is context that is ever so decisive as to what to make of such details. And the first context here is Matthew’s own gospel.

To whom does Matthew usually refer when he speaks about “brothers” of our Lord Jesus? At the end of Matthew 12, Jesus’ earthly mother and brothers are not far off (12:46) when he refers to his present and would-be disciples in exactly this way. “Who is my mother, and who are my mother and my brothers? Pointing to *his disciples*, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my *brother* and sister and mother’ (12:49-50). Similarly in chapter 28, the risen Jesus is clearly speaking about his disciples when he says: “Go and tell my *brothers* to go to Galilee. . . .” Moreover, only two chapters before this, the Lord Jesus tells the disciples that they “are all brothers” (23:8).

And what about that phrase of verse 45: “*one of the least of these*. . . .”? Is this not also a reference to the disciples? In chapter 18, for instance, the Lord Jesus is speaking to his disciples – those disciples who always want to be considered great and significant – that they need to be like children (18:3). To be sure, sometimes the phrase “least of these,” “one of these little ones” refers to children (18:5, 10), but other times it refers to the disciples (18:4, 14) who will only be great in the kingdom if they are content to be the “least” of the kingdom (25:40).<sup>2</sup> Strikingly, in Matthew 10, these two are again linked together. Consider 10:42: “if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to *one of these little ones* because he is my *disciple*. . . .”

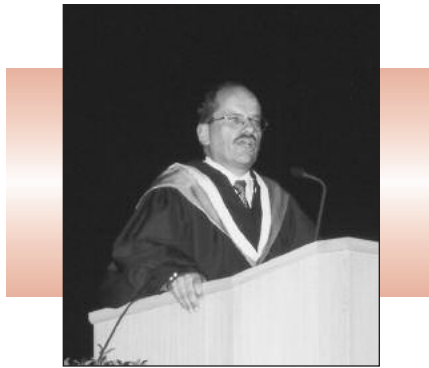
Let me refer you to one more detail. Notice that the King in the parable does not just say that all those who are hungry, thirsty, estranged, naked, sick and imprisoned are his brothers, but the King says: whatever you did to them, you did to me (40) and whatever you did not do to them, you did not do to me (45)! In other words, the Lord Jesus *identifies*, *unites* Himself with these mistreated brothers. Think about that. Although the compassion of our Lord surely goes out to those who are burdened and troubled in this broken world, where else in the gospels do we get the message that the Lord Jesus *identifies* and *unites* Himself with such people in general? Nowhere! But do we not read regularly that the Lord Jesus does identify himself with, unites himself with another group of people, namely, his disciples?

### Messengers of the gospel!

It seems therefore that there is something else that is separating the sheep and the goats here. Namely, this: *the Lord Jesus is referring to deeds of kindness and charity done towards His disciples as they go out with his gospel.* The references are not as general as we assume at first glance; they are very specifically about those *who are called to go out with the gospel.*

Consider once again Matthew's words in chapter 10. There we read about how the Lord Jesus sends his disciples into the world. How does this take place? Are they being sent into a world of hotels and restaurants with expense accounts? No, money is unavailable, restaurants non-existent, and whatever hotels there are, are places of ill repute to which the disciples would and could not go. The Lord Jesus sends them out without gold or silver, without tunics, without a bag, without food (Matt. 10:9, 10), with nothing other than His message and His blessing. And so, Matthew 10 is saying that the great challenge before the people of Israel and all whom they confront is: *how will they receive these men whom Jesus sends out? Will they support them? Take them in? People will be considered worthy (10:11) and homes will be blessed (10:12, 13) when they receive such gospel messengers; but towns and homes will be cursed when they turn them away (10:14-16). Many will show themselves to be unrighteous when they drag the gospel messengers before the local council, flog them in the synagogue, or toss them into prison (10:17).*

And so you see the real point of this parable. In this section of the eschato-



logical discourse (24:1-25:46) the Lord Jesus is emphasizing various themes of his prior teaching. Given the opposition that he is facing here, is it surprising that he should warn and comfort the disciples in this way about the opposition and hardship they will suffer? Spreading the gospel will mean sacrifice in many ways. But along with this there is the promise that ultimately people will be judged eternally on the basis of how they have treated these brothers of our Lord, these "insignificant ones" who spoke to them the Word of God. *Will they give them food, drink, clothing? Will they come to their aid when they are sick, or in prison, or when the world treats them as strangers?*

You see: *the refusal to offer hospitality is ultimately a refusal to believe.* The refusal to accept the messengers of the Lord Jesus Christ is the refusal to accept the message of the Lord Jesus Christ, and even the Lord Jesus Himself.

*There is this tendency to universalize the suffering that the Lord Jesus is speaking about.*

Yes, the Lord Jesus identifies with them. Matthew 10 again, verse 40, very pointedly: "He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives the one who sent me." Even the famous passage about a cup of cold water does not apply generally to all the thirsty of the world; our Lord says: "And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward"(10:42).

In liberal circles, there is this tendency to universalize the suffering that the Lord Jesus is speaking about. In Christian circles there has also been a tendency to generalize the suffering as being all suffering that Christians undergo. But neither of these positions will

do. When we listen to this parable of Matthew 25 carefully and consider also Matthew 10 where our Lord really is putting forth its principles, we realize that this suffering is *on account of the gospel.* This suffering is suffering that is experienced *because someone who is a disciple of Jesus Christ is going forth with that gospel.* They are the least in the kingdom, because the teaching of our Lord gets through to them; it will only be those who are content to be the least who will go forth with the gospel. Perhaps they are also the least because the world surely will treat them as the least – stripping them of possessions, imprisoning them, killing them, and opposing them in every possible way! It is suffering that was first experienced by the apostles; subsequently in the Christian church there have been countless officebearers who have suffered and sacrificed for the gospel. Even if one chooses to use the word "disciple" in the wider sense (along the lines of Matt. 12:50), the suffering is still not entirely generalized but is suffering that is brought about by that discipleship and on account of the gospel.

But let us not draw the wrong conclusions. The gospel is not saying that we can remain cold and inactive with respect to the unfortunate and suffering of the world. The beloved children of the Father overflow with love themselves. The second greatest commandment is to love our neighbour as ourselves (Matt 22:39), and there are other passages which make it clear that we cannot be insensitive to the plight of the poor and suffering (e.g., Luke 16: 19-31). But the point is: this is not what the Scripture is saying *here.* Here we are being told that hearers of the gospel show their faith in the message of salvation in a highly significant way when they receive the messengers of the gospel with hospitality and works of love. And unbelievers display not just character flaws and personality deficiencies when they mistreat the messengers. They show unbelief!

### Beyond Matthew

It is a theme that you find also beyond Matthew's Gospel.<sup>3</sup> Think of a foremost persecutor of the messengers of the gospel, Saul. When he comes to stand before the Lord Jesus on the road to Damascus, what is the question that is asked of him? Notice, it is not "why do you do this to *them*?" but it is: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute *me*?" In the very language of this parable, Saul, the one who persecutes the messengers of the Lord Jesus, persecutes Jesus! (Acts

9:4-5; cf 22:7-8; 26:14-15). And it is striking, once Paul becomes a messenger of the Lord Jesus, he experiences the same. In 2 Corinthians 11:23ff, when he catalogs his own hardships as an apostle of Christ, it all follows the lines of Matthew 25. Hunger, thirst, sickness, persecution, imprisonment, estrangement from people and the world, he experiences it all. Here perhaps we come to understand the words of Paul in Colossians 1:24: "I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church." The Sender and the Sent are One. He identifies with his followers. The persecution of the Christians is the persecution of the Christ.

I do not mean to pretend that this interpretation is new. Others have said it before me. Actually, there is a very old reference to this parable in a second century document called Second Clement. Clement uses the language of the parable in several ways, especially when the unbelievers cry out at the judgement: "Woe to us, for you really did exist, and we did not know it nor did we believe and obey the elders who preached to us of our salvation."<sup>4</sup> Here then, precisely this interpretation was already given already in the second century; the unrighteous realize that they are found unrighteous precisely because they did not receive the word of the elders as the Word of God.

So we see then what difference careful exegesis makes. A superficial examination of the text may lead to one application, but further study leads us to another.

### Application today

If the parable had this gospel focus then, it has the same today as well. The parable calls us this evening to consider first of all *missionaries* and so many others who are facing hardship and persecution for the sake of the tremendously important task of spreading the gospel. Those are the suffering members of humanity that it calls to mind in the first place.

Then, it calls each of us to examine *ourselves* too as to how we are responding to the gospel as it comes to us through the ministers of the Word, and the other officebearers. Let us not be too quick with our judgement, too harsh with our criticism. Be careful for how we react to them – says our Lord Jesus – is how we react to Him! "What you do to them, you do to Me!" The parable reminds those who seek to wear out officebearers with belittling criticism and underhanded ways that there

is a day coming when they will answer for such actions! The Reformed way is to leave the supervision of officebearers precisely to those ecclesiastical bodies that are appointed for the task. True faith shows itself in receptivity to the Word, respect for its messengers, and therein honor to Jesus Christ Himself.

And it calls all those who go forth with the word – also *these young men* before us this evening – to consider the high nature of the task before them. If we are to be treated as representatives of Christ, one with Him, that must have its effects on our walk and our talk as officebearers. Ours is the high task to represent the ascended and exalted Christ. Ours is the great privilege to bring a Message that will be so decisive, even for eternity!

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And it calls me this evening – if I may end on a personal note – to give thanks as I embark on a new task. I have fond memories and gratitude for parents who directed me exactly on this path – a path on which the gospel is central and foremost. I am grateful also to my wife, Teny, and our children who recognize that same primacy of the gospel and so have been a blessing for me in so many ways. Moreover, I can only express gratitude to the congregations who have treated me in such a way that I really have not experienced the kinds of hardships that the parable speaks about. To the congregations of Houston, Ottawa, Surrey, Burlington West and Burlington Waterdown, I express deep gratitude for unmerited kindness and generous support – again, not because of the person, not because of me, but because of precisely these principles of the gospel.

How gracious our God is to us that we have a federation of churches in which the Word receives such primacy of position that we also have a Theological College. To us at the College is given a sacred trust. Many might abandon the Gospel, considering it of little effect in this world. That too is unbelief. But ours is the challenge to hold it high, knowing that it is not some kind of social or political gospel that has power, nor

is it personal ability or charisma that will do it. Only the pure, unadulterated gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ is "the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Rom 1:16).

May we be blessed by receiving many more messengers of that great Gospel. May we encourage that precisely by treating the messengers as we would treat the One who sends them. For one day soon, He is coming and He will separate the sheep from the goats, the righteous from the unrighteous precisely on the basis of this question.

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<sup>1</sup>This misunderstanding appears to be widespread. In recent years, there have been several excellent studies which defend the view presented here. Some of them are: J. Ramsey Michaels "Apostolic Hardships and Righteous Gentiles," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 84 (1965) 32-44; L. Cope, "Matthew XXV:31-46: 'The Sheep and the Goats' Reinterpreted" *Novum Testamentum XI* (1969) 32-44; Graham N. Stanton, "Once More: Matthew 25.31-46" *A Gospel for a New People: Studies in Matthew* (Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992) 207-231. See also J. van Bruggen, *Matteüs: het Evangelie voor Israël*. CNT (Kok, 1990) 432-435. A good survey of the various approaches is found in G. E. Ladd "The Parable of the Sheep and the Goats in Recent Interpretation" *New Dimensions in New Testament Study* Edited by R.N. Longenecker, ed. (Zondervan, 1974) 191-199.

Though unconvincing, the best defense of the position opposed here is probably by C.E.B. Cranfield "Who are Christ's Brothers (Matthew 25.40)?" *On Romans and other New Testament Essays* (T.& T. Clark, 1998) 125

<sup>2</sup>A different word is used in Matthew 25 (*elangchistos*) than in 18 (*micros*) but it should be noted that the difference is negligible as the former is a superlative form of the latter.

<sup>3</sup>One can think also of John's letters where he urges some not to admit those who deny the doctrine of Christ (2 John 10-11) and commends others for rendering service to faithful brothers (3 John 5). Messengers of the true gospel (and those of the false gospel) were very dependent on their hearers for housing, support, and the like.

<sup>4</sup>2 Clement XVII.5. Compare also passages of the early Christian document, *Didache* (or: *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*) XI-XIII in which the church is told how to support traveling gospel messengers and how to distinguish true prophets from false; e.g. *Didache* XII.1-2: "Let everyone who 'comes in the Name of the Lord' be received. . . If he who comes as a traveler, help him as much as you can, but he shall not remain with you more than two days, or, if need be, three. . ." *The Apostolic Fathers*. (Loeb Classical Library, volume 1).