

# Little actions reme

Matthew 25:31-46

## 1. Introduction

This passage, often called the parable of the sheep and the goats, is one of the most misinterpreted parts of the New Testament, yet one of the most vital to guide Christians to know the Lord's priorities in their daily life. Jesus is teaching that how we treat our brothers and sisters in Christ, that whether or not we meet their basic needs, will form the basis of how we are judged by the Lord. It completes the fifth and final discourse in Matthew's Gospel. After recording these words of Jesus, Matthew moves on to the story of the Passion - our Lord's suffering, death and resurrection.

Although often called a parable, this teaching only has three elements of parable to it: the shepherd, the sheep and the goats (v.32-33, perhaps based on Ezekiel 34). All the rest of the teaching is literal and straightforward, not disguised in the picture-language of a parable. Indeed we are left in no doubt about the meaning of the three elements of parable. The shepherd himself is identified as the Son of Man seated in glory on His throne in heaven, the King, while the sheep are the righteous (v.33,34,37) and the goats are the unrighteous.

What our Lord is describing in this passage is the Last Judgment, with all the angels present and all the nations gathered, and the separation of the sheep from the goats.

Matthew's Gospel has been described as "pre-eminently the Gospel of judgment" and many other passages within it speak of separation.<sup>1</sup> We are presented with a most sobering picture of human need and how we respond to it. It is a passage which is terrifying in its implication, for Jesus, in addressing six areas of need, relates them directly to Himself. How we respond to our brothers and sisters is directly related to how we respond to Jesus. To reject our brothers and sisters, not to meet their needs, is to bring His stern disapproval, making us the goats. To accept them, to minister to their needs, means we are the sheep.

The great misinterpretation of this passage has been to think that Jesus is looking at our care for the whole of humanity, rather than, as He says specifically, His own brothers and sisters. This has been a cause of considerable debate, with some arguing, particularly in the present period, that this passage speaks of our concern for the world's poor. Others, especially the historical commentators, argue that Jesus is referring in this passage to the faith community, His followers.

## 2. Christ and His little ones

Jesus outlines six areas of human need, which His disciples would face and which are common to all humanity. He asks us to help even "the least of these brothers of mine" (v.40).

### a) Food

For Jesus' first disciples, life was fraught with uncertainty. Following Him and being involved in His ministry meant forgoing work by which they could have derived income. This made them dependent on

others, vulnerable. Food was an essential requirement if they were to have the strength to follow their Master, indeed for life itself. In our day and in the West, we have almost forgotten this. In the words of Australian Christian song-writer Claire Hazzard, "I eat my food for taste or comfort, not for hunger" (see page 22), and countless cookery programmes on TV reinforce this idea. But there are many Christians today who cannot take for granted their daily bread. When Barnabas Fund started providing monthly food parcels for needy Christians in Pakistan, they were so happy that they did not have to go to bed hungry any more. (See boxes, pages 9 and 10)

### b) Water

In countries where rain is plentiful and clean water readily available, it can be difficult to understand the importance of water. For Jesus and His disciples, living in the Middle East, it was a precious commodity, especially during the heat of the day. Water was life. The Bible uses the powerful imagery of water to speak of spiritual life also. The Old Testament describes streams flowing in the desert and Jesus spoke of Himself as living water.

Some Christians are deprived of access to water because of their faith. An elderly man in Bangladesh who converted from Islam to Christianity was banned by the other villagers from using the village well. Twenty-two Vietnamese Christian families who were expelled from their village in Lao Cai Province, leaving all their possessions behind, found land on which they could settle and grow food, but no source of clean drinking water.

### c) Shelter

In Western societies, homes have become far more than shelter from the

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elements and from those who may attack us. They are a property investment and an opportunity to show off our status, taste and wealth. Some people have more than one. For the first disciples they were essential protection, as they are for many of our brothers and sisters around the world.

When 120 Christian homes were burned to the ground by angry Muslims in Horale, Indonesia, on 2 May, the Christians had nowhere to go but the jungle (see pictures on page 11). A pastor in Belarus, where Christians are persecuted under a communist dictatorship, was told he must demolish his own home in Minsk or the authorities would do it for him.

#### d) Clothing

In our fashion-dominated culture, clothes have little to do with survival. Living in homes and workplaces where temperature is carefully controlled, we do not have to protect ourselves from scorching daytime heat or bitter cold of night as Jesus' first disciples did. But some of our brothers and sisters have only rags or – as for some Christians in South Sudan during the recent civil war – nothing at all. Barnabas Fund provides clothes for Christians who have lost everything in natural disasters or incidents of persecution, such as the attacks in Orissa, India, last Christmas. It also provides school uniforms to enable needy Christian children to go to school.

#### e) Health care

In Western countries in the twenty-first century we are greatly blessed in terms of health care. Even the worst of hospitals far exceeds the care which was available 100 years ago. Britain celebrates this year the sixtieth anniversary of the creation of the National Health Service, an institution which is often disparaged, but how

greatly it would be appreciated by many impoverished Christians who, barely able to afford food, cannot begin to pay for medical care when they are sick.

Jesus, the Healer, fully recognised the needs of the sick. Barnabas Fund provides medical care, for example, in northern Iraq where many Christians have fled from the anti-Christian violence in Baghdad and Basra. Here Barnabas Fund provides two mobile clinics which travel around the region to care for sick Christians.

#### f) Prison

Prisons in the West today deprive you of your liberty for a while, but all the above five needs are met. In our Lord's time, as in many places today, this was not so. Without someone to visit and bring you the basic necessities, you would really suffer. An email to Barnabas Fund on 27 June told of a young Uzbek Christian in jail for being a pastor's assistant: "The investigator gave his father written permission to meet with him but his father couldn't even pass his clothes to him."

Barnabas Fund supports a ministry which helps Southern Sudanese women (mainly Christians) who are in prison in North Sudan, providing them with clothes, blankets, medicines and Bibles. Most of these women are in prison either because they have failed to cover themselves as required by shari'a or because, as refugees and war widows, they have run up debts they cannot repay.

A visitor also brings great comfort and consolation to the prisoner. David Shestakov is a church leader serving a sentence in a labour camp in Uzbekistan, many miles from his home. Barnabas Fund is not only supporting his wife but also helping her with the costs of making the long journey to visit him.

### 3. Christ and His brethren

The message of the sheep and the goats has often been misunderstood in recent times. The early Church, however, took the words of the Lord Jesus at face value: "Whatever you did to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me." (v.40)

They recognised that He was saying that the kindnesses referred to are those which His followers did to their fellow-believers. This is how commentators have historically understood the phrase "brothers of mine". The sheep and goats are not being separated on the basis of their actions towards mankind in general but on the basis of their care or neglect of other Christians.

Dr R.T. France explains that the phrase "the least of" is linked to the expression "little ones" which Jesus uses many times in Matthew's Gospel to mean all His disciples or followers. A clear example of this use of the term occurs in Matthew 10:42 where Jesus says that "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". Incidentally, this is another verse where Jesus encourages His followers to care for each other. Our Lord's little ones, the least of His brethren, are the defenceless ones, the oppressed, the despised, the weak, the vulnerable, our brothers and sisters scattered across the world in situations of great need and persecution. These are the little ones we have a mandate to care for.

This is not a message which we often hear today, but it is what the Bible says. It chimes with Jesus' command to His

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disciples to love one another as He has loved us (John 13:34-35). If we read the Bible with our eyes open to God's priority we see how many other places there are where He tells us to care for our own Christian family.<sup>2</sup>

This does not mean that Christians should ignore the needs of non-believers, for throughout Christian history Christians have had a noble part to play in meeting the needs of suffering humanity. They have established many worthwhile endeavours. However, as Paul points out in Galatians 6:10, although we must do good to all, our **priority** should be the household of faith.

### 4. Christ and us

Harold K. Moulton writes about the implications of brotherhood in Christ:

"It means that we cannot evade responsibility for our fellow-Christians. If we disclaim our family relationship, we are acting like Cain towards Abel, or the older brother towards the prodigal. It means that brotherhood must be personal and individual, that it must embrace the whole Church, and that it must be world-wide."<sup>3</sup>

Jesus describes how both the righteous and the unrighteous were amazed at how

their conduct was viewed by the King, how important to Him were the humble unexciting duties which had been either performed or neglected. It seemed strange to the righteous that these small favours and kindnesses, which the doer had probably forgotten almost immediately, had been remembered by Christ, had been treasured up by Him to be mentioned on the Day of Judgment. It was these little tasks of day to day living which, Jesus says, proved that they were His true disciples. The righteous evidently felt that they had accomplished so little; yet to the Lord their loving care of their fellow-believers was all important.

So let us be encouraged that the smallest of our actions, the smallest of gifts, to help our brothers and sisters is seen and remembered by our Lord.

Some might ask whether there is a contradiction between this passage and the teaching of the Apostle Paul on justification by faith (Ephesians 2:8-10; Romans 3:20-24; Romans 5:1-2). As Paul makes clear, we are not saved by our righteous works but by faith in Christ. The reason for the difference between the passages becomes clear when one considers the different contexts and audiences. Paul was writing about how people could **become** part of the Body of Christ. Matthew is recording words spoken by Christ to guide those who **are already** His followers about how to live and behave while they wait for His return.

We need to remember that Christ has already paid the penalty for our sins. Despite our failings and weaknesses,

He accepts us and destines us for glory. It is in gratitude for what He has done that we obey His command to meet the needs of our brothers and sisters and then go to the rest of the world.

**A powerpoint presentation to accompany this sermon is available to download from [www.barnabasfund.org/scs](http://www.barnabasfund.org/scs)**

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Other examples in Matthew's Gospel are: separating wheat from chaff (3:12), sincere people from hypocrites (6:2,5,16), wise builders from foolish (7:24-27), wheat from tares (13:30), good fish from bad (13:48-49) and profitable servants from unprofitable (25:14-30). This Gospel also records many other scenes of judgment such as the unmerciful servant (18:23-34), the labourers in the vineyard (20:1-16), the wicked tenants (21:33-41), the wedding guest without wedding clothes (22:1-14), the faithful and unfaithful servants (24:45-51), the wise and foolish virgins (25:1-12).

<sup>2</sup> Here are some: Song of Songs 1:6; Matthew 10:42; Acts 2:44-45; Acts 11:28-29; Romans 15:25-26; Galatians 6:10; Hebrews 6:10; Hebrews 13:1; James 2:15-17; 1 John 3:11,14,16-17; 1 John 4:7,11-12

<sup>3</sup> Harold K. Moulton, *The Challenge of the Concordance*, London, Samuel Bagster & Sons, 1977, section on "Brotherhood in the New Testament", p.63



I tell you the truth, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me!  
Matthew 25:40 (New Living Translation)