

Is Salvation by Social Justice?
An Analysis of Matthew 25:31 – 46
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Mt.25:31 But when the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. ³² All the nations will be gathered before him; and he will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats; ³³ and he will put the sheep on his right, and the goats on the left. ³⁴ Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. ³⁵ For I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited me in; ³⁶ naked, and you clothed me; I was sick, and you visited me; I was in prison, and you came to me. ³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry, and feed you, or thirsty, and give you something to drink?’ ³⁸ And when did we see you a stranger, and invite you in, or naked, and clothe you?’ ³⁹ When did we see you sick, or in prison, and come to you?’ ⁴⁰ The King will answer and say to them, ‘Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of mine, even the least of them, you did it to me.’ ⁴¹ Then he will also say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels; ⁴² for I was hungry, and you gave me nothing to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave me nothing to drink; ⁴³ I was a stranger, and you did not invite me in; naked, and you did not clothe me; sick, and in prison, and you did not visit me.’ ⁴⁴ Then they themselves also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ ⁴⁵ Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ ⁴⁶ These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.’

Questions

1. One interpretation of this passage goes as follows:

Motif	Interpretation 1
Son of Man comes in his glory	Jesus’ second coming
Nations	All peoples
Sheep	People who are really saved, true Christians
Goats	People who are not saved, false Christians
These brothers of mine (v.40)	Those who are generally poor, sick, naked, homeless, etc.
The basis for salvation	Whether you ministered to the poor, sick, naked, homeless, etc.
Application	To be a true Christian, you must minister to the poor, sick, naked, homeless, etc.

2. According to that interpretation, who are the “brothers of mine” that Jesus speaks about? The poor, sick, naked, imprisoned, etc. This has the effect of emphasizing Christian social justice, which is firmly rooted in Scripture elsewhere. But I don’t believe that this is the meaning of this particular passage. Notice how Jesus uses the phrase “these brothers [Greek *adelphoi*] of mine” throughout Matthew?
 - a. Mt.12:46 While he was still speaking to the crowds, behold, his mother and brothers [*adelphois*] were standing outside, seeking to speak to him. ⁴⁷ Someone said to him, ‘Behold, your mother and your brothers [*adelphois*] are standing outside seeking to speak to you.’ ⁴⁸ But Jesus answered the one who was telling him and said, ‘Who is my mother and who are my brothers [*adelphois*]?’ ⁴⁹ And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, ‘Behold my mother and my brothers [*adelphois*]!’ ⁵⁰ For whoever does the will of my Father who is in heaven, he is my brother [*adelphoi*] and sister and mother.’

- b. ^{Mt.23:8} You have only one master and you are all brothers [*adelphois*]
 - c. ^{Mt.28:8} Go and tell my brothers [*adelphois*] to go to Galilee
3. And conceptually, there is another place in Matthew where Jesus identifies himself with his disciples:
- a. ^{Mt.10:40} He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives Him who sent me. ⁴¹ He who receives a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet's reward; and he who receives a righteous man in the name of a righteous man shall receive a righteous man's reward. ⁴² And whoever in the name of a disciple gives to one of these little ones even a cup of cold water to drink, truly I say to you, he shall not lose his reward.

I will hazard some commentary to make this more clear:

- b. ^{Mt.10:40} He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives Him who sent me. ⁴¹ He who receives a prophet [disciple] in the name of a prophet [Jesus] shall receive a prophet's reward; and he who receives a righteous man [disciple] in the name of a righteous man [Jesus] shall receive a righteous man's reward. ⁴² And [extending this argument even further] whoever in the name of a disciple [one of you apostles] gives to one of these little ones [other disciples like you who are being sent out] even a cup of cold water to drink, truly I say to you, he shall not lose his reward.
4. From this point, if we interpret 'these brothers of mine' consistently as 'the disciples,' then we arrive at an interpretation that is even more ethically challenging, and makes a great deal more sense in the context of Matthew's Gospel.

Motif	Interpretation 1	Interpretation 2
Son of Man comes in his glory	Jesus' second coming	Jesus' second coming
Nations	All peoples	All peoples
Sheep	People who are really saved, true Christians	People who are saved
Goats	People who are not saved, false Christians	People who are not
These brothers of mine (v.40)	Those who are generally poor, sick, naked, homeless, etc.	Disciples – Jesus assumes that they will be poor, sick, imprisoned, etc.
The basis for salvation	Whether you ministered to the poor, sick, naked, homeless, etc.	Their response to the disciples and their message.
Application	To be a true Christian, you must minister to the poor, sick, naked, homeless, etc.	Perspective for the disciples as they are sent out in the Great Commission to the nations.

The merits of interpretation 2 over interpretation 1 include:

- (1) literary consistency in handling the phrase 'these brothers of mine';
- (2) Jesus' expectation that the disciples will be rather poor and persecuted throughout the world, which is consistent with his expectation earlier in the Gospel (e.g. Mt.5:9 – 12; 6:19 – 24; 19:13 – 30); this is partly because Jesus values all humanity and sends his disciples to other people who are poor and persecuted, and partly because evangelism will garner a negative response from others, who will then persecute the disciples;
- (3) consistency in the way Jesus sends his disciples out in the Great Commission to the world, where Mt.25:31 – 46, as the last long discourse Jesus has with his disciples prior to his death, resurrection, and commissioning, now sheds light on that mission and why it is important to Jesus; otherwise, under interpretation 1, it seems like a non-sequitur;
- (4) consistency in the tight, personal association Jesus makes with his disciples, beginning with his birth title Immanuel – 'God with us' – and his closing promise in the Great Commission – 'I am with you' – all of which makes Jesus' identification with his disciples a consistent theme throughout the book;

- (5) consistency in the basis of salvation and judgment, that they involve a reception or denial of Jesus himself; thus, salvation *results* in social justice because of the imperative of Jesus' love for all, but social justice is technically not a criterion of salvation.
5. Is there another biblical precedent for God identifying Himself with His people, that is, those upon whom His presence rests:
- a. Abraham and Abraham's descendants: 'Now the LORD said to Abram... "I will bless you, and make your name great; and so you shall be a blessing; and I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed."' (Genesis 12:1 – 3)
 - b. Jerusalem, the city of His presence: 'For thus says the LORD of hosts, "After glory He has sent me against the nations which plunder you, for he who touches you, touches the apple of His eye."' (Zechariah 2:8)
 - c. Christians: 'And it came about that as he journeyed, he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him, and he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"' (Acts 9:3)
 - d. Christians: 'Do you not know that you are a temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him, for the temple of God is holy, and that is what you are.' (1 Corinthians 3:16 – 17)

Application Questions

1. Why does Jesus link himself so tightly to his disciples? How does that make you feel? In what sense is that scary? Empowering?
2. Jesus expects his disciples to be evangelistic and, as a result, rather poor and persecuted. This is partly because Jesus values all humanity and sends his disciples to other people who are poor and persecuted (Mt.5:9 – 12; 6:19 – 24; 19:13 – 30), and partly because evangelism will garner a negative response from others, who will then persecute the disciples. Are you okay with this?
3. Who are the non-Christians that you are loving and explaining Jesus?