

HUMANITARIANISM WITH A POINT: A SECOND LOOK AT THE PARABLE OF THE SHEEP AND THE GOATS MISSIOLOGICALLY

■ Who was Christ referring to as "the least of these my brothers" in Matthew 25? The answer to this question has profound implications for the churches' approach to frontier missions.

By John L. Amstutz

"Inasmuch as you have done it to one of the least of these my brothers, you have done it to me" (Matthew 25:40). Few verses are used more frequently than this verse by Christian humanitarian organizations. Whether the appeal is to invest in a ministry to prison inmates or to give toward a ministry to feed the hungry and cloth the needy, this is the "John 3:16" of charitable organizations. It is *the* verse that validates and underscores the biblical basis of such ministries to the less fortunate people of any society.

Let there be no doubt about it, the Bible makes clear a Christian's responsibility toward the poor and needy. Jesus was anointed of the Spirit to "preach good news to the poor" (Luke 4:18). He seemed to show special concern for those who lacked life's essentials, the poor and the oppressed. Thus, He instructed His disciples to "sell your possessions and give to the poor" (Luke 12:33). He affirmed the Jewish practice of almsgiving, placing it on a level with the practices of prayer and fasting (Matthew 6:1-4). In the parable of the "Good Samaritan" Jesus clearly identified one's obligation to "go and do likewise" for a neighbor in need irrespective of ethnicity or socio-economic standing (Luke 10:25-37). By such teaching Jesus identified with God's concern for the poor in the Old Testament where the God of Israel is described as "a stronghold to the poor, a stronghold to the needy in his distress" (Isaiah 25:4). Howard Snyder is right when he concludes that "there is biblical evidence for God's particular concern for the poor... if one takes the trouble to look for it" (*The problem with wineskins*, p. 41).

But is such unconditional humanitarianism the point of the parable of the sheep and goats in Matthew 25? Perhaps we need to take a second look at what Jesus intended to teach in light of the context in which the parable is found, namely, the "Olivet Discourse." Matthew 24:4-35 outlines Jesus' remarks concerning when the temple of Jerusalem and its buildings will be destroyed and "what will be the sign of His coming and the end of the age" (vs. 3). Since no one knows the exact day or hour of His coming, not even Jesus Himself, the need for "watching" is imperative (vs. 36ff). To underscore the meaning and significance of such alertness Jesus told several parables. The parable of the sheep and the goats is the final parable and concludes the "Olivet Discourse" as found in Matthew.

Simply stated, the parable of the sheep and the goats pinpoints the basis of the judgment of the nations. Jesus, when He comes in His glory as the Son of Man, will separate the peoples (*ethne*) of the earth into two groups, sheep and goats. The basis of this division will be the response to "the least of these my brethren." Those identified as sheep responded positively. They fed, gave drink, provided hospitality, clothed, cared for, and visited Jesus' brethren when they were in prison. The goats, on the other hand did none of this. In both cases neither the sheep nor the goats were aware of when they had so responded and they ask the question, "When did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison...?" (vss. 37,44). Thus, the identity of the "least of these my brethren" is crucial for a proper

understanding of the basis of judgment.

A survey of commentators indicates that the majority hold "the least of these my brethren" to be oppressed and suffering humanity. Typical of the comments of such writers are the words of R.V.G. Tasker:

In virtue of the divine compassion and the infinite sympathy shown in His life on earth the Son of man has come to feel the sorrows and afflictions of the children of men as though they were His own. He can, therefore, in a very real sense refer to the suffering men and women as His brethren ("The Gospel According to St. Matthew," *Tyndale commentaries*, p. 238).

In light of such interpretation no wonder contemporary Christian humanitarian organizations use Matthew 25:40 as they do. But again, we ask, is such unconditional humanitarianism the point of the parable?

Matthew 12:46-50 clearly states that Jesus' "brothers and mother" (i.e. His family) is "whoever does the will of my father in heaven." Luke 8:21 clarifies this phrase with the words "hear God's word and put it into practice." Who are Jesus' brothers? Those who are both hearers and doers of His word, namely, those who are His disciples who "continue in His word" (John 8:31). Jesus' close identity with His disciples is taught in Matthew 10:40-42.

He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives the one who sent me. Anyone who receives a prophet *because* he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and anyone who receives a righteous man *because* he is a righteous man will receive a righteous man's reward. And if anyone gives a cup of cold

water to one of these little ones *because* he is *my* disciple, I will tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward.

One's response to Jesus' disciples is one's response to Jesus Himself and the Father who sent Him. Is not this reality the basis of Jesus' question to Saul on the Damascus Road, "Why persecutest thou me"? Had not Saul's persecution of believers in Jerusalem, in fact, been a persecution of Jesus Himself? It seems so.

If this is a proper interpretation of the word "brethren," then the point of the parable of the sheep and the goats is even more pointed. Earlier in the "Olivet Discourse" Jesus had said that "this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness to all nations (*ethne*)" before the end came (24:14). Apparently this parable assumes such a worldwide witness to all nations through Christ's disciples. Therefore, the basis of judgment of the nations rests on their response to these disciples and thus to Jesus Himself. A positive response indicates a sheep, a negative response indicates a goat. Also accompanying this worldwide witness would be persecution, for Jesus Himself also had said His disciples will be "hated by all nations" (24:9). Apparently the universal proclamation of the gospel of the kingdom will be accompanied by a universal positive and negative response to that proclamation in that some will show kindness to persecuted believers/disciples while others will not. Some

will give them something to eat and drink and take them into their homes, caring for the sick and even visiting those in prison for their witness to Christ. Others will do just the opposite. Rejection of "the least of these Jesus' brethren" is in reality a rejection of Him. It was this point of identity with Jesus that apparently occasioned the question of surprise on the part of both the sheep and goats, "When did we do this to you?" The element of surprise was *not* their treatment of believers. Rather it was in their treatment of Christ himself who was identified with such believers. The issue was *not* unconscious humanitarianism to mankind generally, or even unconscious humanitarianism to Christ's disciples specifically. The issue was unconscious kindness to Christ Himself... or the lack of it. The parable of the sheep and goats teaches humanitarianism, but with a point.

The implications of such an understanding of this parable are significant. *First*, the parable assumes the universal preaching of the gospel is not optional in the plan of God. "Missions" is not an appendage on the church's agenda. It is essential. A worldwide witness is the foundation for the judgment of the nations. *Second*, accompanying this universal witness to Jesus Christ will be persecution. Indeed, "all who would live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (II Timothy 3:12). Opposition for one's faith in Christ is not just for believers in the Middle East and Asia. Christ's disciples will be "hated by all nations"

because they are in all nations. *Third*, the place of hospitality and kindness toward followers of Jesus Christ is no small matter, particularly toward those who are being persecuted for their faith in Him. "By this shall all men know that you are my disciples if you have love one for another" (John 14:35). Therefore, in the words of the Apostle Paul, "Let us do good to all men, *especially* to those of the household of faith" (Gal. 6:10). Is it not time we free this pointed parable of the sheep and the goats to speak clearly and fully of the crucial place of the universal preaching of the gospel to *every* nation and the opposition and persecution that will attend such preaching? And is it not time we free this pointed parable to speak clearly and fully of the essential need for intentional humanitarianism toward those who have chosen to suffer loss for their witness to Christ in these nations? Humanitarianism with a point is the point, and the point is "for, inasmuch as you have done it to one of the least of these my brothers, you have done it to me"! And never has a proper understanding of this pointed parable been more important than it is during this final decade of this millennium as the Church increasingly focuses on the final frontiers many of which are in resistant Muslim areas. ■

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